

## If anyone is listening by lovelysarcastic

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**Summary:**

"I can see it now," I said, leaning against the bathroom's door.

Mike, who was brushing his teeth, gave me a short, confused look.

"What?"

"Why I fell in love with you."

## 1. The nap

Everyone called me Eleven because that had always been my favourite number. Also, because I was born on the eleventh day of the eleventh month, at approximately eleven am. Or was it pm?

When I was six years old, I started asking people to call me Eleven instead of Jane. Since then, I've been known as "El" among my friends and family. Sometimes even teachers would call me that. I was really proud of myself.

My dad was the chief of police in our town, Hawkins, Indiana. Small place. Nothing big ever happened. His name was Jim Hopper. Everyone knew who he was, and how he died trying to save two little kids from a fire. I was fourteen when it happened. My mom, Terry, did her grief as a good widow should do. Then, when I was eighteen years old, she moved on and met Martin Brenner. He was a doctor. I didn't like him very much. They still lived in the house where my dad used to live.

I was twenty years old now and studying Film Studies at George Washington University (my mom wasn't quite sure what my field of studies actually meant, but she always proclaimed it very proudly to her friends and neighbours). I lived in a small flat with my two best friends, Will Byers and Samantha Montez. I made dinner for us three nights a week and washed the dishes on the other nights, except Sunday. That was my break day from chores. Will was studying Arts and Samantha was studying Journalism and Mass Communication. We had dreams. We wanted success. We talked about this almost every week, especially when we were bored at home, procrastinating.

Today, it was Wednesday. And everyone knew what Wednesdays were for: getting drunk at the nearest party and waking up the following day not sure of what happened the night before. Oh, and praying that we didn't screw up. That's where I was right now, in someone's bathroom, making sure my red lipstick was still good. Will was somewhere with his latest toyboy. I think his name was Lucas. Not sure, thought. Samantha was waiting for me outside, yelling at people who were impatiently waiting in line.

"Geez, she's coming! You... you guys suck!" She proclaimed drunk and offended.

I opened the door and walked out, with a foolish smile on my face. She grabbed me, let out a screech right next to my ear and said she needed another shot.

"No, Sammy," I pouted. "No stairs," I added, looking at the dozens of stairs we would have to walk down to find the kitchen and the drinks. She grabbed my face and made me look at her in the eyes. Sammy had the bluest eyes I had ever seen. She was also shorter than me, which was something that made me laugh every time she pulled me down to look at her.

"El, sweet, sweet El, I love you and I understand your struggle, but! The guy I've invited to come to the party with me has yet shown up. I need more drinks if I want to recover from this broken heart."

I laughed. "You talk like you actually have a heart," I teased. "But okay. Let's go drink. One more shot. Just one, Sammy!"

She kissed my cheeks happily and then pulled me with her.

We found it very difficult to climb down the stairs. I had to apologize to a guy for crashing into him. We found the kitchen soon and Sammy stole one bottle of whiskey, which, thanks to some divine force, still had some alcohol in it. I made a face, but she ignored me. Grabbing two plastic cups, she made me drink a huge amount of whiskey – way more than a normal shot - with her after yelling "Fuck boys" in a room full of them.

"If you want, I'm available," one of the guys said after we took our shot.

She snorted into her cup – like she would ever be interested in him -, but then took a second glance at him and smirked. She left me, walking up to a group of five guys. "Well, well, well, but can you handle me, sweetie?" She asked him.

And I knew I was on my own now. So, I walked out of the kitchen. I saw the living-room full of people dancing and making out. *There is*

*no way I'm going in there.* I decided to face the stairs once again. I could do it, really. I was pretty sure – although I didn't remember quite well – that I had walked up those stairs before. If I did it once, I could do it again. (Me drunk wasn't the most coherent person anyone can meet. I once spent two hours telling a girl how I could eat ten eggos in less than five minutes. Two hours. And I was certain that I did not convince her, just annoyed her.)

I climbed five steps and decided that that was it. I couldn't do it. I sat down, leaning against the white wall and close my eyes.

*I think a nap is what I need to recover my energies.*

Just a small nap.

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"Mommy, mommy, b'eakfa't!"

I had the worse headache ever.

*Wait, did someone call me mommy?*

I opened my eyes. A small girl with curly dark hair, a freckled face and big, brown eyes was staring at me with a huge smile. She couldn't be more than three years old.

My head was killing me.

I sat up, feeling confused. I was in a bedroom, which clearly belonged to a couple. The bed was huge, covered in yellow sheets, and, on the other side of it, there was a bedside table with a man's watch, a book and an alarm clock, with the numbers 10:34 written in red, on it.

Out of the blue, the little girl ran out of the room. There was a nice smell on the air. Like pancakes. And chocolate. I frowned and got out of the bed. I was wearing a man's t-shirt. It had Star Wars written on

it. I got even more confused. I found a man hooded jacket in a chair mixed with woman's clothes. I was pretty sure they were mine, for some reason. I took it and put it on.

I walked out of the bedroom and was met with a small corridor. There were two doors to my left and, going forward, there was an entrance to a living-room. Hesitant, I crossed it. There was no clear division between what was the living-room and the kitchen. The little girl I had seen in the bedroom was standing up on a chair and had a closed, plastic cup on her hands.

"It hot," she complained, putting it down.

There was a man near the stove. He had his back turned to me and was clearly cooking something. He chuckled when the little girl spoke.

"I told you it was... Oh, hey you!" He greeted me after turning around. He had dark hair, just like the little girl. His face was also covered by freckles. His smile, as he looked at me, was warm and, for one second, I completely forgot he was a complete stranger to me and smiled back.

"Hey," I greeted back quietly.

He frowned. "Are you okay?" I nodded.

"Mommy, panckaka!"

"Pancakes, sweetie," the man corrected. He was my age. I was sure of that as well. He walked up to the table with a plate full of pancakes. There was chocolate on top of them. "Aren't you coming, El?" He asked me.

I blinked. He knew my nickname.

"Mommy, come!"

I blinked again, confused. I walked up to the table and sat down next to the man. He leaned over and gave me a small peck on the cheek. My skin burnt when his lips touched it. What was happening?

"You don't seem okay," he said, worried.

"I have a headache," I whispered. I should be panicking. Why wasn't I demanding to know what was happening? Who was he? Who was the little girl who kept calling me mommy? Where was I? Where were my roommates?

A pancake appeared on the plate in front of me. When I went to grab my fork, I froze in shock. I had a ring on my left hand. A wedding band. Was I ... ? I looked at the man's left hand and there it was, a golden ring just like mine. I stood up. They looked at me, confused. But I couldn't say anything. I didn't know them, goddamn it. I walked out of there and back into the bedroom. I opened the wardrobe and picked random clothes.

"Are you okay?" The man had followed me. "El..."

"I am," I answered dryly. "Can you leave? I want to change." He looked surprised by my request. Of course, he was. We were sharing wedding bands.

But we weren't married. We couldn't be. I didn't want to get married. That was a choice I made when I was nineteen. I wouldn't back up from it. No matter who would come along. That was part of my promise to myself.

"You are acting strange, El."

For some reason, I didn't want to tell the man that I didn't know who he was. I felt like I would hurt him and I didn't want that. Why wasn't I reacting like I should? "I just need some air." I wasn't even sure in which city I was. Through the window, I could only see the sky and more buildings.

"If that's what you need." He looked sad, leaving the room.

I got dressed quickly and put on a pair of pink sneakers. When I walked into the living-room, slash kitchen again, the guy and the kid were eating in silence. He glanced at me, worried, but I ignored it and walked out of the flat with no keys or phone.

I recognized the city after a few minutes of walking. I was in

Washington D.C. I was taking my undergraduate degree here. Well, right now, I wasn't. I was living with a strange man and a child. I had a ring. *Shit, El. How much did you drink last night?!* I made my way to my actual flat, the one I shared with Will and Samantha. It was actually pretty close to the other flat. I rang the doorbell three times, but no one answered. I looked around, but I couldn't find a clock anywhere. People were walking, talking, going on about their lives, and I just stared at them, like they were weirdos, when I was the one in the wrong place.

I finally realized that I had forgotten my wallet. I felt a bit hungry and my headache was getting worse. The ring on my hand felt heavy now that I knew it was there. I touched it a few times, feeling its coldness against my fingers. How old was I? Yesterday I was pretty sure I was twenty. Now, there was a ring on my left hand, a guy with a matching ring and a little girl who called me mommy. Was I still in school? Did I graduate? Did I drop out to get married to the first guy I had met? I had questions. Too many questions. And there was someone that could answer me. But I didn't want to go back to that flat. I didn't want to face him. I wanted to be back at that random party, grab Samantha and Will and go home.

Suddenly, I remembered a place where I could feel like I was home. There was a park nearby. When I first moved here, I came across it on one of the few times that Will and I decided to jog. It was huge and very popular among students, since it was near a large range of bars and cafés. I went there. I found my spot. It was a green area fenced by bushes and trees. When I sat down, I was completely hidden by anyone who walked by. In one of the trees, the one which was most surrounded by pretty flowers, I had embedded with a pocket knife a name: Jim Hopper. My dad. I was living too far away from home to visit his grave, so, I did a small memorial in his honour. It was silly, but, whenever I felt sad or homesick, I would come here and talk a bit with him. I knew it sounded crazy. My mom made a better job at moving on than I did.

"Hi Dad," I greeted the name carved on the tree with a sad smile. "I'm so confused with what is happening right now in my life..." I suddenly had tears on my eyes. Dad had always been there for me, whether it was when I fell off my bike, or when someone hurt my

feelings. He knew how to cheer me up. And then he was gone. He was now a beloved hero of the Hawkins population. But I was his daughter and I was still missing him badly. I took a deep breath, "So, why am I here... Well, I was at a party yesterday. With Sammy and Will. I drank too much. I'm sorry, Dad, I did. You know I'm usually responsible, but there was a really hard essay I had to write and... Sorry, that's not the point of this story. I went to the party, I got drunk and I passed out... That I'm sure of." I made a small pause, trying to focus. "I woke up this morning and..." I didn't know how to say it out loud. It sounded insane. "I'm living a life that isn't mine, I think... I mean, there is a guy. I live with him. We're married because -" I rose my hand to show the ring to the tree - "I have a ring. A wedding ring. And... there is a little girl. She looks like the guy. And she calls me mommy. When did I decide to become a mom, Dad? You know I didn't want that... I had a goal in life: enjoy it. Graduate, find my dream job and... then, whatever. I didn't want a marriage, or kids. I suck at taking care of kids. God..." I closed my eyes. "What am I doing? I just sound insane."

I tried to control myself. I leaned back on the tree behind me and took deep breaths.

"What am I going to do, Dad? I mean, ... I'm not dreaming..." And I pinched myself just to prove a point. "I'm not. I know that. So... Where am I? Is this an alternative reality? How did I end up here? Was it because of the alcohol? I promise I will never drink again if I can just..." I looked at the sky. "Please, whoever is up there, let me go back to my life. I promise... I won't drink?" Even I wasn't sure that my promise was good enough to make whatever-divine-force-there-was change their minds.

I looked down again to my own hands, to the ring.

"Okay, El." I told myself. "Maybe if you go to sleep tonight, tomorrow you'll be back to your old life." I was honestly not buying my own words, but I stood up, said goodbye to my dad and walked out of the bushes. There was a couple sitting on a bench nearby. They were surprised to see me almost jumping over a bush. I ignored their stare and kept walking. I'm sure I could find my way back to the flat.

**Notes for the Chapter:**



I hope you enjoyed it! I apologize for any grammar mistakes!

## 2. The husband

I knocked on the wrong door twice before I came face to face with the dark-haired guy at the right door. I sighed in relief. He let me in without a word and closed the door behind me. I saw a set of keys, a phone and a wallet laying on the kitchen table and I knew they were mine.

The guy – and, God, I still didn't know his name and we were apparently married – sat down on the couch. The TV was on and there was an episode of *The It Crowd* happening. I looked around for the little girl, but she wasn't here. Should I ask for her?

"Mae is with Will," the guy said.

"Will?!" I walked closer to him. That's a name I know. "Where is he?"

The guy frowned. "In the zoo... He and Lucas had told us they were going to take her to the zoo. Remember?"

Lucas? Wasn't that the name of the guy Will had just started seeing? The one he took to the party? I was pretty sure he had said they wouldn't last. It was just a rebound from his ex... The ex who had broken up with him on their anniversary. I could even see Will sitting next to me on our couch, in our flat, talking about how he had met the perfect rebound. He worked at Starbucks and was really cute. Was he name Lucas?

"El?"

"Yes? I'm sorry. I remember now..." I bit my bottom lip. Maybe if I went to bed right away I would fall asleep and wake up on *my* reality. I looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost one o'clock. I hadn't even eaten anything today.

"There are pancakes on the microwave, if you want," the guy spoke like he had read my mind.

I murmured thanks and went to the small kitchen. I turned the microwave on for a minute. Then, while waiting, I stared at the

fridge. There was a list of groceries and it seemed uncomplete, with only five items listed. Next to it, there was a drawing. It wasn't a great one, but it was sweet. Three sticks were drawn on it. Two females, one bigger than the other and with brown, and a smaller one with a big smile and dark hair. There was also a male with dark hair and red dots on his face.

It was my "family". This family. Under the drawing, there was a picture. There I was, in the arms of the guy sitting on the couch, and with the little girl on my lap. We were all smiling. The guy was looking at me in the picture and I could see it. The love he felt for that woman. For me. How had we met?

I was suddenly awoken from my thoughts. The microwave had beeped. I took out the plate with the warmer pancakes. The chocolate liquid was a bit thick, not as perfect as it had been this morning.

I looked around, wondering in which drawer the knives and forks were. Noticing my confusion, the guy snorted disappointedly and gave me the answer. The drawer on the left, near the fridge. I thanked him and grabbed what I needed. Then, I found myself having another dilemma: where should I sit? The guy had turned his back to me and was now interested in the TV show that was on.

*Come on, El, be reasonable.* So, I sat on the table, away from the stranger.

I should find out his name. I looked at the cell phone that had been on the table when I came in. I grabbed it. It wasn't locked, thank goodness. All I had to do was swipe my finger on it and I was staring at a photo of the guy and the little girl, smiling at me. Their freckles were shining and there was no way of telling where one's dark hair began and the other's ended. They were beautiful.

I opened the messages small box. I saw Will's name, followed by a Max. Who was Max? Her last message said: *See you on Monday, Ellie.* Samantha's name was nowhere to be found, which I found odd. There was also a Dustin and a Mike. I opened the last name's messages. He called me love throughout the messages. Maybe that was him? I looked up and, hesitantly, I called out "Mike".

The guy on the sofa turned around immediately with a hopeful look. His name was Mike. I smiled. At least, I wouldn't make an ass of myself. I knew his name.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. I just... I read your name in my messages. Sorry."

"Oh." He frowned. Instead of turning around, he stood up and walked up to me. I tried to keep it together. He sat down on the chair next to me. He looked troubled. "El, what's going on?"

"Nothing."

He was too close for a stranger.

*He wasn't a stranger. Look at the matching rings.*

I still didn't know him!

I couldn't tell him that, could I? I put myself in his shoes for a second; waking up and my wife not remembering me or our life together... He would never believe me. He would say I was being crazy.

Why was I concerned about his thoughts on me? I should leave. I should call Will.

Will. I should definitely talk to him. He would understand me, right? He knew me since we were kids and we had to do that stupid theatre play in third grade.

"El, honestly, you're acting so weird." The guy – Mike – said and shook his head. "If there's something wrong, you can tell me... Don't, don't shut me out. That's not how we do things."

How should I know that?

*Don't be rude*, I advised myself.

"I have a headache." I reminded him.

“I can get you an aspirin.”

I shook my head. “I think I just need to lay down for a while...”

He looked sad for a moment. Then, he nodded. “If you need anything, I’ll be around.” He was about to lean in, but then stopped. I blinked. He stared at me for a few seconds and then got up. He went back to the sofa.

I finished the pancakes and put the plate in the sink. Then, I went to hide in the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind me. I took a good look at the room. It was big. On the right, there was a huge, black wardrobe, which I had already taken some clothes from. There were pictures on the wall. I was in some of them. The guy, Mike, was with me, or with the little girl. On the left side of the room, I had a small table. Maybe a desk? There were some books on it. More pictures. On the wall above it, there was a paper glued to the wall. I walked up to it. It was my hand-writing.

### *Mouth breather*

I blinked, confused. When I was a kid, that was what I used to call people who were idiots. My dad used to laugh when I said it in front of him. My mom always complained that I shouldn’t say those kinds of things.

Why did I have written on a paper? I looked around, even more confused. The sheets on the bed were still untangled, like I had left them. Maybe it was time to sleep. Maybe I did not need answers to these questions since I was going to wake up on that stupid party again.

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I felt something cold on my face. I squeezed my nose, displeased. I pushed the covers up, trying to hide my face from whatever it was cold. I heard someone laugh.

I opened my eyes. Will was in front of me.

Will.

I sat up and quickly hugged him. He laughed again.

“Whoa, you act like you didn’t see me two days ago.”

No, I saw him yesterday. At a party.

Behind him, I could see the room. Not my room, not his, not our flat. I was still stuck on this alternative reality. I sighed and let go of him, sitting back down on the bed. He looked suddenly concerned.

“I need to talk to you,” I whispered. I knew if I told him the truth, he would believe me. He has always been by my side. He knew who I was. He knew I wouldn’t make something like this up.

“Okay, what’s wrong?”

I looked at the opened door. I could hear voices coming from the living-room. The little girl’s giggled. She seemed happy.

I leant closer to Will and whispered, “Not here.”

He frowned, confused, but nodded.

“I’ll let you get dressed, then.” He stood up. “I’ll be waiting in the living-room.”

After he left, I grabbed the pants and sneakers that I had taken off to go to bed and put them on. I looked myself in the mirror. There was one near the door. It was a small square and it had small, colourful stickers on it. My hair looked like a mess, so I found a small elastic band and wrapped it in a messy ponytail.

I walked in the living-room. There was a black guy sitting next to Mike on the sofa. The little girl, who had been on his lap, saw me, smiled and ran up to me. She rose her smalls arms, showing me a penguin toy.

“Mommy look. A pe’gui!”

“Penguin, sweetie,” Mike clarified.

She repeated correctly. I smiled softly at her, unsure of how to react. My eyes went back to Mike, who looked miserable staring at the little girl. The guy next to him was frowning and giving side glances at Will. I blinked. That was Lucas. That was the guy Will had just started seeing.

“Well, El and I are just going to grab a coffee, okay?” Will informed the other guys.

Lucas stood up. Will approached the sofa and whispered something in his ear. He nodded, giving me a short glare. For some reason, he was suspicious of me.

I followed Will out of the flat, taking the phone, the keys and the wallet that were still on the table with me. Will took me to a café across the street from the building I was supposedly living. He ordered a coffee and I chose a cup of tea. I felt my mouth dry. The headache was still there, not as strong as before.

“So, what’s wrong?” He asked me.

I licked my lips, suddenly feeling uncertain. What if he thought I was crazy? Or worse, a liar? Making things up to cover something? I wouldn’t do that. Ever. He knew that. Right?

“I... Remember that party we went... When we were twenty? It was at a guy’s house... There were the worst stairs ever to climb. Lots of alcohol... A tiny bathroom?”

Will blinked. He remained quiet for a bit, thinking.

“El, you do know that you just basically described almost party we went to during college, right?”

He was right. I tried to think of something else to help my description.

“Well, you had just started seeing Lucas. I remember you saying he was cute and that you were going to use the party as a bait for him to... you know.”

Will snorted. The waitress brought our coffee and tea. We thanked

her.

“Well, yeah. I remember that party. It was at Troy’s. He was a douche, but had a nice house,” he said. Troy, yes. The guy Samantha was talking to in the kitchen. That was him. “Samantha slept with him that night.”

I made a face and he let out a small chuckle.

“Yeah, that’s exactly how you reacted when she first told us,” he said. Then, he took a sip from his coffee and his facial expression changed. “So, what about that party?”

I suddenly noticed that his hair was shorter than how it used to be. He also looked older. How old were we in this reality?

“I... You’re going to think I’m crazy, but... I was there yesterday. And this morning I woke up and was here...” I said, pointing to the building that we had just left. “And I married... and I think I have a kid...”

“You think? Pretty sure Mae is your daughter,” he interrupted me. He had a deep frown on his face and was looking at me apprehensive. “Are you and Mike having problems?”

I didn’t know how to answer that because I had no idea of how Mike and I’s life was until this point. I didn’t even know how we met.

“You think I’m making things up,” I said, insulted.

“What am I supposed to think, El?” He asked.

I leaned over and touched his hand. I made him look at me. Will knew me. He had to believe in me.

“I’m not making this up. I swear to you, Will, my last memory is falling asleep on that party, completely drunk. I don’t know anything about this life. I don’t even know how old I am... How old am I?”

“Twenty-five,” he answered. There was a kind of surprise in his brown eyes. And then doubt.



I gasped.

"I'm twenty-five? No!" I said, pulling my hand back from his. I looked at my tea, which was getting cold. "I can't... What? I was twenty... What happened in these past five years?"

"Mike," he answered. "And Mae. Your family." He leaned over. "You literally don't remember anything?"

I shook my head.

"When is Mike's birthday?" He asked, suspicious.

I shrugged. "No idea."

"Mae's?"

I shook my head again.

That was the moment he started to believe in me. He looked at me, shocked. Then, he took a big sip from his coffee and I decided to drink my tea. I made a face when I realized I hadn't put sugar in it.

Will wasn't talking. He was just staring at me, like he was trying to figure me out, while I put sugar in my tea and then mixed it.

"What do you think happened? For... you not to remember..."

"I think I'm in an alternative reality," I said sincerely.

He tried to control a laugh.

"Oh, no, this is real life. I know it."

"Well, I'm not dreaming," I said back, a bit mad.

Any hint of laugh disappeared from his face. He apologized. I drank a bit of my tea. It was almost cold, but I didn't mind.

"What do you think I should do?" I finally asked, worried.

"Talk to Mike."

I shook my head, "He'll think I'm crazy."

Will looked at me even more surprised. "God, you really don't know him, do you?"

I blinked, confused.

"Mike would never think that of you. He knows you."

I shrugged. And then I felt bad. Maybe that guy, Mike, really knew me. But right now, I didn't know him. The only person I could trust was Will.

"You believe in me, right?" I confirmed. Will nodded. "Why?"

"Why would you pretend not to know Mae's birthday? She's your daughter."

I sighed in relief.

"Honestly, El," Will started again, "the only thing I can tell you right now is... to go with it."

I frowned. "Go with it?"

"Yes. I mean, until you go back to... I don't even know what to say in this situation." Once again, Will had a really confused expression on his face. "Just don't be scared of Mike, or Mae. They are your family."

"Can I call, or text you every time I need?" I asked in return. He nodded. "Thanks, Will... Can I ask you something else?"

"Yeah, of course."

"What happened?" He frowned, confused. "With you and Lucas. I mean, when you met him, you told us that you two weren't going to last..."

He chuckled. "That part you remember?" He shook his head, still laughing a bit. Then, he stopped and looked over at the building across the street. "He was nice. He is. And sweet. He actually cares

about me. It took me a few months to realize it, but, once I did, I was really, really happy, El.” I smiled at him. “And so are you,” he added. “With Mike. Believe me.”

“I didn’t marry the first guy I met, did I?” I kind of joked.

“Well, it was a surprise, you two, but... I think that’s something that, if you really want to know, you’ll have to ask Mike.”

### 3. The strawberry jam

Lucas and Will said their goodbyes around seven pm. Mae hugged them both and then ran back to her spot on the sofa to watch TV. Mike and I led them to the door and he closed it after they left. Then, we stared at each other.

I could see how he was hesitantly trying to come up with something to say to me. He was nervous and I was suddenly intrigued by his face. I just kept staring at him, watching how he opened his mouth slightly to speak and then close it. How his brown eyes moved from me to his feet and then back. He was beautiful. And his freckles... I wanted to touch them. But that would be weird.

*He is your husband*, I reminded myself.

Before I could do anything, he spoke, "Want to order pizza?"

Mae screamed an excited yes from the sofa, I nodded. He forced a small smile and walked away, going into the corridor's direction.

Then, it was only the little girl and me. Quietly, I made my way to the sofa. She had her penguin toy on her lap and was smiling at the TV. There was a cartoon show on. Carefully, I sat down on the other edge of the sofa. She looked at me, frowned for a second and then crawled until her tiny hands met my lap. She sat on me with a smile.

I didn't know how to react. She pointed to the TV and made a small remark about the cartoons. I smiled at her and she moved on my lap, making herself more comfortable.

It felt natural, to have her on my lap. Her dark hair smelled like shampoo and the skin of her hands, which were playing with my fingers, were the softest thing I had ever touched. She was adorable. And I could feel it, the possibility of her being related to me.

Mike came out of the bedroom holding his phone. He looked at me and got surprised at the scene. Then, a small, happy smile appeared. I looked down, embarrassed.

“Cheese and pepperoni with extra olives on it?” He asked.

I looked at him, open-mouthed. That was my favourite type of pizza. Every time we ordered pizza, Samantha would complain about the quantity of olives that I demanded. She would joke, saying they made people fat. In return, I’d show her my biggest smile and ask if I had the face of someone who cared about that.

“Yes, please” I whispered. Mike nodded, still smiling, and called the pizza place.

While talking, he made his way to the kitchen. I could hear him opening and closing shelves. After hearing him say goodbye on the phone, I looked behind me and saw he had lined three glasses – one of them was the closed plastic one that Mae had been holding this morning -and was pouring orange juice into them.

He brought the two made of glass with him and put them on the small table in front of us. Then, he went back to grab the other one. He sat down next to me and gave the plastic glass to Mae. She thanked him with a cheeky smile before starting to drink from the straw happily.

I looked at Mike. He glanced at me as well, before shifting his attention to the TV. Maybe he was expecting me to start some sort of interaction, to show him that I was his wife and everything was okay.

Maybe I should follow Will’s advice and tell him the truth. Maybe he would understand me, as my husband... I repressed a chuckle. Who would have thought that I, Jane Hopper, would have a husband and a kid at the age of twenty-five? Not me, certainly.

I could see myself, sitting in that small flat, next to Samantha and Will, talking about how I would never follow the typical female stereotype of getting married and having kids. It was a choice that I had made. I didn’t want to settle down. I wanted to go out there, only having myself to take care of – and I was already a handful of trouble, I knew I was –, and just be happy like that. I remembered hearing Samantha and Will laughing at me, saying that karma would get me from saying those kinds of things. I knew they were only

joking. They were quite understandable. And, of course, having their share of broken hearts, they would sometimes agree with me, saying that “yeah, boys suck”. Will had his heart broken too many times. Samantha trusted people too easily. I just didn’t care enough to try.

The doorbell rang after a while. Mike stood up and went to get the door. He paid the delivery boy and I heard him giving him a small tip and wishing him a good night.

Mae slid down from my lap. She put down her plastic glass and started picking up pillows. I frowned.

“Mommy, come.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me to the floor.

Mike came back to us with the pizza on his hands. He went around the table to get to this vacant sit and put down the pizza on the small table after I took out the glasses of orange juice. It was gigantic.

Only one slide of it was left at the end. Mae, for my surprise, ate two and half slides. Then, she snuggled on my lap and closed her eyes. Mike smiled a bit when that happened.

“She had a long day,” he added. “Better put her in bed.”

I knew I should do it. But I panicked and stared at him. He looked back at me, trying to figure me out. Finally, he sighed, grabbed Mae’s sleeping figure and stood up, cradling her in his arms safely.

“I’ll clean the dishes” I said, although there were only three glasses to wash.

Mike didn’t answer and left the living-room. I stood up, grabbed all the glasses and went to the kitchen to wash them.

Mike didn’t come back. Not even after I put the pizza box in the garbage – something that took me a while to find out where it was – or rearrange the pillows on the sofa. I shut the TV off and decided to go to bed. The door in the middle of the hallway had the lights on. I could see it through the gap at the end of it. I also heard water running, so I assumed that was the bathroom. The door on its right had to be Mae’s bedroom, I concluded.

Should I go there? But she was asleep already...What would be the point?

I went to the bedroom I shared with Mike. I made my way to the wardrobe and tried to find some pyjamas. But I got nothing. I frowned. Did I sleep in man's t-shirts every night? I turned around at the same moment Mike opened the door and walked in. He wasn't looking at me again. He walked up to the bed, to his side, and, pulling the sheets with him, laid down. I turned to the wardrobe again and grabbed an old, baggy t-shirt. I went to the bathroom and changed there. I looked myself in the mirror and asked myself to remain calm. Maybe tomorrow I would be back to being twenty and drunk at a party.

I looked at the small plastic cup that had three toothbrushes in it. The small, purple one was certainly Mae's. The bigger ones were green and blue. I picked the green one, assuming it was mine since it was my favourite colour.

When I got back to the bedroom, Mike was laying on his side, facing the bedside table. I walked to my side of the bed and quietly got in it. I covered myself carefully, trying not to pull the sheets from Mike, and then laid down, turning my back to him.

It took my hours to fall asleep, but eventually, around two am, my eyes closed and I slept.

---

I woke up five hours later, once again with a terrible headache. I looked at the time and groaned. On the other side of the bed, Mike was now sleeping on his stomach, arms under his pillow. His hair was in front of his closed eyes. I forced myself not to touch him and got up quietly.

I walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge. I studied its contents, looking for something to eat or drink. There was strawberry jam on one of the shelves. I smiled and took it out along with a liquid

yogurt.

I was making toasts with strawberry jam on it when I heard small steps. I looked up and saw Mae. She let out a yawn.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?” I asked her.

She gave me a sleepy smile.

“Hung’y.”

“Hungry” I corrected her like I had seen Mike do. I presumed it was a thing that we did with her to help her learn how to speak correctly.

I prepared some more toasts with strawberry jam on it, warmed some milk in the microwave and put it in front of her. She looked surprised at the breakfast.

“Can I?”

“Of course...” I said, a bit confused.

She took a huge bite of her toast, smiling.

We ate our breakfast in silence. Mae looked more awake and happier. She was starting to ramble about something. I wondered if she was already in kindergarten. How did this family work? Did I have a job that I liked? Did Mike have one? Who took care of Mae during the weekdays?

I couldn’t believe I was actually asking myself these questions. If Samantha saw me now, she would laugh so hard.

Samantha. I suddenly had a vivid image of my best friend in my head. How she was small compared to me, how she had blue eyes and dark hair. What happened to Samantha? Her name wasn’t anywhere in my recent messages. That was odd since she was the second person I would call whenever something happened. The first one had always been Will.

I met Samantha in my first year of college. Will and I had been looking for a roommate to share a flat with. She was one of the



people that replied to the ad. We got along straightaway. We used to go to so many parties, get drunk and pretend that we did not have any exams to study for. She was a believer that human beings had a soulmate, but only after a certain age, and that we were all going to reincarnate after death. She was sure that she had been a nurse in a previous life, for some reason.

“Mommy?”

I blinked, waking up from my thoughts. I looked at Mae and frowned. She was looking a bit red and her breathing wasn't right.

“Mae, are you okay?” I asked and got up. I approached the little girl, crouching next to her. I put a hand on her face.

“Mo-“ She grabbed her own throat and started coughing. Then, tears followed.

I started panicking. What was happening to her? What did I do?

I screamed Mike's name. I completely panicked, yelling his name over and over again until he showed up, his hair a complete mess. I looked from him to Mae and he understood right away that something was wrong.

“Oh, no, no!” He took Mae's face between his hands. “What did you eat?” He looked at the bit of toast she hadn't been able to finish. Then, he stared at me. “You gave her strawberry jam? She's allergic to it, Eleven! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

He stood up and ran to the bedroom. He came out a few seconds later with trousers on and sneakers. He had a set of keys in his hands.

“I'm taking her to the emergency rooms.” He said, pulling Mae up from her sit. She wrapped her tiny arms around his neck, holding herself. Her breaths were getting worse.

“I'll go.” I volunteered.

“No.” He refused. He looked really pissed.

The moment the door closed I went to find my phone. Shaking, I

called Will. He didn't answer. I called again. I had tears in my eyes and was trembling.

"El?" His sleepy voice picked up.

"I hurt Mae."

That's when I started to cry.

Will tried to understand what was happening, but couldn't figure out what I was saying through my tears. He finally gave up and told me he was on his way, along with Lucas.

I laid down on the bed, crying. Mike had looked so angry. Mae had been struggling so hard to breath. I was terrible at this.

*Whoever put me in here... if anyone is listening, please, let me go back to my old life. I don't want to hurt anyone here.*

#### **4. The trusting-in-each-other condition**

Lucas and Will arrived shortly after. I opened the door and Will hugged me right away. Lucas looked suspicious, yet worried, asking me what had happened.

“Just grab her a glass of water first, please” Will requested gently.

Lucas nodded and went to the small kitchen. Will took me to the living-room. He sat me down on the sofa and combed my hair with his fingers. I couldn't stop crying, although I had no more tears to cry out. I sobbed quietly, my head against Will's shoulder. Lucas came to us with the glass of water. He gave it to me before sitting down next to his boyfriend. I took a sip.

“What happened?” Will asked, worried. “Where are Mae and Mike?”

I tried to control my breathing before answering, “I gave... her strawberry jam.”

Lucas and Will frowned together.

“But she's allergic to it...” Lucas said. He shared a quick look with Will. He was certainly more apprehensive now. “Why did you do that?”

I shielded myself from his question by hiding my face behind one of my hands and taking deep breaths. I heard Will saying something to him, but I didn't get it.

I could have killed Mae. That would be on me if I destroyed this family and the other-me, the one that actually belonged in this reality with Mike and Mae, she would be destroyed when finding out what I did...

Or maybe this was really me dreaming, and it had just turned into a horrible nightmare.

My headache got worse. I took another sip from the water Lucas had given me and then put the glass down on the floor. They were both looking at me, nervous. Lucas, of course, was a bit confused as well.

And mad. He was probably thinking I was a terrible mother.

And I was.

I was twenty, for God sakes. Two night ago, I was drunk at a party. Geez, last week I threw up in a restaurant and was kicked out. That had been a terrible night.

Lucas suddenly stood up. He took his phone out of his trousers' pocket and said he was going to call Mike to see if he had any news.

Will watched his boyfriend putting some distance between us, and then turned to me. "El, you didn't know", he whispered.

"But I hurt her nonetheless..." I said back, sobbing. And she was just a little baby. She was, what, three?

Will hugged me tightly. Lucas came back a few minutes later, saying that Mae was already being treated. Mike was sure that they would be back after lunch.

"See, El, everything will be okay," Will said, trying to be positive. But I just couldn't.

Unexpectedly, a phone started to ring. The sound was muffled. I looked around, confused. Will said it was my phone. I didn't even recognize my goddamn phone ring.

I got up and went to the bedroom to grab it. There was a Max calling me. I answered quietly.

"Where are you?" She asked, worried. "You should have been at work one hour ago, El. Remember?"

I sobbed, trying to be quiet about it, but she heard it, "El, what's wrong?"

"Mae is in the hospital... Strawberry jam... Allergy."

"Oh, El! Is she okay?" She sounded truly worried.

I nodded. Then, I remembered that she couldn't see me. "Yes. Mike is

with her... I'm sorry. I completely forgot to go to work." I lied. Where did I even work?

"Don't worry. I'll tell Dustin. He will totally understand. If you need the day off tomorrow as well, just text me, or him, okay?"

"Okay," I whispered. "Thanks..."

We said our goodbyes, and then I hung up. I left the phone on the bed before going back to the living-room.

Will and Lucas, who seemed to have been talking to each other, went suddenly quiet as I walked in. Lucas gave me an unpleasant look. Then, he excused himself, saying he had to go to work. He said he would call Mike later again, when he had a break. Will stayed with me.

"Don't you have work?" I asked him, sitting down next to him on the sofa after Lucas left.

Will smiled. "You're gonna laugh because you don't remember, but I'm a yoga instructor."

I stared at him in shock.

"Yeah, I know. I started taking yoga classes in the end of our second year of college. I loved it. I got obsessed. Did a course on it and got a job," He told me.

"But your art...?" I was confused. Will had loved drawing and painting since we were kids.

"I have an undergraduate degree on it, don't you worry. I finished college. Sometimes I give workshops on it, or private lessons. It's good, El. Don't worry." He had a small smile on his face, confident.

*Okay, El*, I assured myself, Will seemed happy with how his life had played out. Even if he wasn't a successful artist conquering awards after awards and having his art exposed and appreciated.

"What about me?" I asked next. "A girl called... Max..."

"Oh, yes, Max. She's great," he said. "You work with her at the cultural department of a marketing company. You love it."

I blinked. That sounded... nice.

"And who is Dustin?"

"He is your supervisor. The head of the department. You call him The Big Brain whenever you're pissed at him. But he's great as well. We have all had a few dinners together," he told me.

Once again, it sounded nice. This life wasn't as bad as I was afraid it could be. I had a job, a nice one for the looks of it, and what it had seemed a good family before I screwed up, and friends, especially Will and...

"Samantha," I suddenly said. "Where is she?"

Will looked away and I knew something terrible had happened.

"Will, please."

He sighed.

"You two had a fight... a couple years ago," he admitted.

"Why?" I asked, confused. What could we have possibly fight about and not make up later? Samantha had a fierce personality, so did I. We were both too stubborn and sometimes, yes, we would clash and argue about the silliest things (once we didn't talk to each other for three days because of ice cream brands. Yes, it sounded ridiculous, and it was. We were eighteen and dumb). But we would always make up.

"Well..." Will started. He made a face, unsure of what to say; of how to say it. "Well, remember that party... the one you talked about yesterday?" I nodded. Yes, my last memory of my real life. "Well, Samantha had a date that night... Do you remember that?" I nodded again, confused. I remembered she had said he was late and that was why we drank another huge shot of whiskey. "Well, her date was Mike."

I looked at him shocked. Wait, what?

“She was okay with it at the beginning...” Will said. “With you and Mike. She was happy. But then, when things got too serious between you and him, she got... jealous. And things were said. And you two never spoke again.”

There was no way that could be it. Samantha and I fighting over a boy? Stopping being friends because of a guy? If I was in my actual life right now, and not this alternative reality/dream/whatever it was, I would laugh so hard. It couldn't be. I couldn't have ruin my friendship with Samantha over... over a guy.

“That's impossible...” I whispered.

“I'm sorry, El...” he said sadly, rubbing my back. “But that was a long time ago...”

“Not to me,” I interrupted him. “We were friends two nights ago. That's how I remember it, Will! And some guy... No way. I didn't even want a relationship in my future. I didn't want a family. I ...”

“Life is full of surprises, El.” I gave him an angry look. “It's true! You might not remember it right now, but you're happy with Mike. And Mae.”

Mae.

I looked down again, feeling terrible. Maybe I should call Mike and see how she was... I got up, leaving a confused Will in the living-room, and went to get my phone from the bedroom. I found Mike's number on the contact list and called him on my way back to Will.

Mike didn't pick up. I sat down next to Will, with my phone on my hands. I didn't know how to feel. Finding out I lost my best friend because of a guy... Hurting little Mae, who was innocent in all of this... Feeling bad about the way Mike had looked at me this morning, despite not even knowing him... I closed my eyes. Tears were threatening to fall again.

Suddenly, my phone beeped. I had a message from Mike.

*She's okay.*

I smiled, a bit relieved. Will, who read the message, gave me a small hug. "See, nothing to worry about."

"I still have to deal with Mike," I said.

Will sighed.

"Tell him what is happening..."

"What if he thinks I'm lying?"

I was actually afraid that he would think that. Or, like Will had first thought, believe that I was making things up to cover up something wrong in our marriage. I didn't even understand how this marriage work, let alone find problems in it. I just knew I didn't belong here.

"That's why you need to tell him," Will answered me with a serious look. "You need to know him, El. There's a reason why... Actually, there are a million reasons why you two got married. So, trust him and tell him the truth."

---

Mike came home around two pm. He had a sleeping Mae in his arms. Will, who had stayed and made sure I had lunch, helped him take Mae to the bedroom, and then left. He gave me one last hug and wished me good luck.

I was sitting on the sofa, waiting for Mike to finish his shower. I was edgy, worried and with a feeling that I would cry the moment I saw him walk out of the bathroom. I was never good at dealing with anxiety... you know, that kind of anxiety that made you want to throw up and just hide yourself until your problems were gone? I always hated that feeling. And I didn't particularly like it when mixed with so many other emotions. One second I'm telling I shouldn't be reacting like this because they are strangers to me. Next, I'm saying to stop being an idiot, that I'm here for a reason. Then, I'm back



again wishing I was in my reality, in my world, in my drunk twenty-year-old self.

I was such a mess.

Long time ago, Dad told me that everyone had the right to be a mess once in a while, when he caught me crying because I ruined my science project out of rage for something that was so stupid that I couldn't even remember now. It was okay, as long as I got over it and moved on. It didn't matter if I had learnt a lesson, or if it had all been a completely emotional chaos, as long as I knew that life went on.

I missed my dad so badly.

Finally, the bathroom door opened. From the sofa, I could see Mike. He stopped, already in a set of clothes to stay-in, and looked back at me. I stood up, not at all ready for this confrontation.

The minute Mike walked in the living-room and I could see the hurt in his eyes, I started to cry. And I could see him, troubled, wanting to confront me (God, he did love me, didn't he?) and to still be mad for the horrible mistake I had done.

"El," he started, taking one step closer, "what happened?"

I sobbed. "I'm sorry."

He shook his head and took another step. "Just tell me why. Why did you give our daughter something she was allergic to? I know that you know she can't eat. I know... God, I... Just...what the hell, El?"

"I don't know." I confessed. He looked at me, confused. "I don't remember anything. I woke up yesterday and I... I don't know where I am. I don't know anything!" I cried.

Mike just kept staring at me, completely confused.

"Wha... What?" He repeated, lost.

I took a deep breath.

"Two nights ago, I was at this party. I was twenty, still in college... I

got drunk and passed out.” I gulped, trying to focus on my story. I needed to sound coherent, and not crazy. “I woke up here the next morning.” I added, ignoring the tears that fell down my face. “I’m being complete honest with you. I ... I don’t know anything. I don’t know this place, I don’t know you, or Mae...” It actually hurt to admit that out loud. “I only know Will. I swear. I mean, I didn’t even know my age until yesterday afternoon when I talked to him. I didn’t know what my job was until this morning when this Max called me...”

Mike didn’t know how to react. His face expression went from confusion, to pain, to anger, and back to pain. What was the point of all this situation? Me hurting other human beings? Me being a terrible, terrible person? Why couldn’t things just remain how they were? I didn’t need to be stuck in this dream, alternative reality, whatever... I didn’t need to see someone like Mike getting hurt. Or Mae.

Maybe I should leave. Find a place to stay for a while. Try to get back to my old life. Pretend that this never happened.

“What did you tell me last week?” Mike suddenly asked. “What did you tell me, El?”

I looked at him with a blank expression. I had no idea what I had told him... I shrugged and shook my head. He stared at me in shock.

“I promise you, Mike...” I started. There was a change in his eyes. A hopeful look? It was gone before I could understand it. Pain replaced it. “... I’m telling you the truth. I don’t know anything. This isn’t my life. I’m not crazy. I’m just... I don’t know. I didn’t want to hurt Mae.”

He sat down on the sofa. I took a few steps back when he came closer. I wanted to give him his space. And *I* needed some space as well.

“What was it?” I asked him. He looked at me. “The thing I told you...”

He gave me a small smile. “It doesn’t matter.”

He then took a deep breath and brushed his wet hair with his fingers. He was thinking. He had a deep frown on his face, eyes focusing on nothing, and I could see his lips moving a bit, like he was going to start to talk, but then rethought and remained quiet.

I finally got the guts to ask him, "Do you believe in me?"

Slowly, he nodded.

"Why?" I asked, confused.

"I know you," he answered. "I know that if something was wrong... whether it was with you, or with both of us, you wouldn't act like this. And, if you wanted to actually end this relationship, if that was what you really wanted, you wouldn't make something like that up. And you wouldn't put Mae in danger..."

I blinked, surprised. He chuckled softly seeing my reaction.

"Yeah, I know you, El."

I finally sat down next to him. I still put some space between us, and Mike seemed to be okay with it, as he was with all this crazy, yet honest story that I had just told him. Dramatic films didn't prepare me for this, for hearing someone telling me they believed my insane confession. I recalled those discussions between Will, Samantha and myself about films and how their intriguing and complicated plots would be resolved if people just trusted each other a bit more. Just like Mike, who I did not know, trusted me because he knew me. Maybe not this me, maybe another me. Another Jane Hopper. Another Eleven. Another El. He knew some variation of myself and he trusted this me because of that.

"Thank you," I whispered. "For believing in me."

He nodded.

"Yeah, no problem", he said in a bit of raspy voice. Then, he cleared his throat. "What do you think happened?"

I made a face, before giving my answer, "Another reality?"

He considered the option as viable, to my surprise.

“Or a dream,” he added.

“I’m pretty sure I would have awoken if it were a dream,” I replied.

“What about loss of memory?” He tried.

“Yeah, it could be possible... But did something happen for me to lose my memory?”

He shook his head, defeated. “No, we had a pretty boring week, actually. But you can go to the doctor... Have some exams done...” He suggested.

“And what do I tell him? I woke up one normal day and remembered nothing from the past five years? He’ll write me down as a lunatic and that would set off a whole bunch of dramas, wouldn’t it?” I replied.

Mike controlled a smile and agreed with me. We stayed in silence for a bit, thinking about our options. Alternative reality, dreaming, sudden loss of memory... What else could it be?

“Maybe...” Mike started, unsure “The future? I mean, you’re saying that you don’t remember me... you remember a party...”

“When did we meet?” I asked.

“When we were twenty.”

“That’s the age I have!” I exclaimed.

“Maybe we met afterwards of what you remember...”

I took that into consideration.

“Do you think it can be the future?” He asked.

“It could make sense.” I murmured.

But why would I wake up in my own future? What would be the point of it?

*Well, what would be the point of waking up in an alternative reality?*

I should stop trying to put any logic into this situation. If it had any kind of rational procedure, I was far from understanding it.

“Is Mae really okay?” I changed the topic.

Mike nodded. “Yeah. She just has to take a medicine for a few days...” He gave me a side glance. “Maybe we should do a list of things you must know?”

I immediately agreed. If I was going to be stuck here, I might as well understand how things worked. Maybe knowing them would help me get back to my... I didn’t even know how to call it, honestly.

“But El?” I looked at Mike. “You have to trust me, okay?” I frowned at his words. “I know you have some trust issues and... I’m a stranger to you right now.” He seemed really miserable saying that. “So, just trust me, okay?”

I nodded. “Yes, of course.” And smiled. “I mean, you’re trusting me, so... it always seems fair to trust you.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Please tell me what you think! Thanks for reading!

## 5. The must-know list

I looked down at the list Mike had written for me the previous night.

*1. Mae is allergic to strawberry jam and is afraid of the dark. She likes drawing and singing. We always try to correct her when she mispronounces a word to help her learn.*

*2. We have been married for two and half years now. Mike is a cartoonist. He usually works at home. He can't swim and really hates lemons. So, no lemonade.*

*3. You work with a girl named Max in the cultural department of a marking company called Sign-Me-Up. You work from nine to five pm. Right now, you are planning a small film event for the summer. Sometimes you get to stay at home because Dustin, the head of the department, is awesome.*

*4. Will and Lucas are Mae's godfathers. Lucas is cool. You can trust Lucas.*

*5. Most of our neighbours are cool, but don't try and say hi to the couple from 2B. For some reason, they hate us.*

And that was it, for now. He said that I could ask him anything I wanted at any time. Of course, he had also researched this kind of weird situation I was living. After breakfast, and me calling Max saying I couldn't come to work again, we googled alternative realities, traveling to the future and sudden losses of memory. None of them really helped.

"It says here that maybe you have unfinished business." He told me, lifting his head from the laptop in front of him. I was sitting across from him on the table. I made a face. "No?"

"What kind of unfinished business? With whom?"

Having no answers to my questions, Mike changed our research topic to dreams. I was drinking a cup of tea. I had already taken an aspirin. I woke up once again with a terrible headache and my mouth dried. Mike assumed it might be connected to the fact that my last memory

was from when I was drunk, so waking up with a headache is like waking up with a hangover, and *maybe* it was the bridge between that life and this one. I found that theory really unpleasant. It meant I would wake up every day feeling like shit.

“I’m not dreaming.” I told him after he read my something from a website. “We’ve discussed this.”

“How do you know that for sure?”

“I’m really not that creative in my dreams,” I replied. He snorted. “And it seems too real to be a dream.”

Mike closed the laptop, ending our little investigation. He stood up, grabbing his cup of coffee and taking it to the kitchen to wash it. I stayed in my place, staring at his back. He was so tall and slim. He had great shoulders, though, and between them there was a nice curve in his t-shirt. I asked myself if it was something that I did in this life, going up behind him and putting my head against his back. Because I felt like doing that.

“Mike?” I called out. He looked over his shoulder, letting out a small noise. “Tell me how we met?”

He looked at me, unsure.

“Please?”

The water stopped running. He cleaned his hands on a cloth and came back to the table. He sat down in front of me.

“Do you want the version that you don’t really remember, or just the one you don’t remember?”

I looked at him, confused. “Well, in fifth grade, I went on a school trip to... God, I don’t remember where it was, I just know that on our second day there, we went to the zoo. I was having a blast with my friends and suddenly this girl came up to me and punched me in the face.” I gasped. He chuckled. “She said I had messed with her ponytails. I hadn’t. Then, her friend came saying she had mistaken me from “the real criminal”. The girl apologized and then spent the next hour with me, in a small room, while the staff took care of my

bleeding nose. She told me her name was Jane, but everyone called her Eleven.”

Mike stopped talking for a bit. I gave him a small smile. I actually remembered punching a boy’s in the face... But that was it. I didn’t even know that I had spent an hour with him and told him my name and nickname. It seemed legit, though, at that time I would tell everyone I was named Eleven.

I was going to reply when Mike started speaking again, “I never forgot her, really, because... who on earth calls herself Eleven, you know?” We chuckled. “But I moved on with my life... Until second year of college. I was late to this party and, when I got there, this girl was sleeping on the stairs... I decided that maybe I should take her out of there? I mean, some guys were already giving her some looks... I tried to wake her up, but she didn’t respond. I knew she was okay, because she was even snoring a bit, so I grabbed her and took her to an empty room. I stayed with her... She woke a couple hours later. When she saw me, she panicked and punched me in the face.”

I stared at him, open-mouthed. He was smiling. “I punched you twice?” I asked. He nodded. “Oh, my... I’m sorry...”

“Yeah, it’s fine, El... It was five years ago.”

“Still,” I mumbled. But his happy appearance made me smile. Then, suddenly, something clicked in my head and I matched his story with my memories. He noticed my frowning expression and asked me what was wrong. “I passed out on some stairs... That’s... That’s my last memory...” I looked at him. “You were Samantha’s date that night. Will told me.”

Mike seemed embarrassed. “Yeah, I was...”

“What happened?”

“Mommy? Daddy?”

Mae was rubbing one of her eyes, sleepy. I hadn’t seen her since yesterday. She slept most of the day and Mike took care of her always in her bedroom. I did make her dinner. But I didn’t have the courage



to walk in her bedroom and face her after what I had done...

Mike stood up and went to take her into his arms. "Hey sweetie," he greeted and kissed her small, red face. She seemed really tired. I looked at the clock on the wall, next to the entrance of the hallway, and saw that it was almost eleven am.

"Do you want breakfast?" I asked her with a nervous smile. But Mae didn't seem mad at me. She wiggled her way out of Mike's arms, who put her down gently on the floor, and then ran to me to give me a hug. Her dark, curly locks were all over my face and I smiled against them.

"Pan'ke?"

"Pancakes?" I repeated. She nodded excitedly. "I don't think we have those today..."

She made a sad face.

"But we can go out for breakfast!" Mike suggested with a big smile. Mae looked at him with her tiny eyes sparkling. She had my eyes, I noticed. Brown. Mike's eyes were darker, just like his hair. But not Mae's. And her nose was just like mine.

She was the perfect mix of Mike and I, I suddenly realized. The thought of it freaked me out at first, but then I relaxed.

We dressed her and then left the flat to go out to this small place which, apparently, we all loved. Mae was super excited to see her favourite waiter, who was also the owner, Steve, since he always gave her a small lollipop at the end. Mike told me we started going there three years ago, when I was pregnant with Mae. He said I really craved sweets throughout the pregnancy. I believed in him since I had always had a sweet tooth. My dad used to joke about how my teeth were going to fall out before I was even allowed to drive. I always got mad at him because I knew how to care of my teeth, thank you very much. He would just laugh.

It was a bit weird to hear Mike talking about the time I was pregnant. I looked down at my body and didn't feel like that had actually

happened. I should also feel a bit weird about it, have that small thought on my head saying “nope, that did not happen”, but looking at Mae, and after what I had done to her, I just didn’t have it in me to actually feel that way. I was actually okay.

I was oddly okay with all of this, I knew that. But I thought to myself that, well, if I were to wake up in an alternative reality, or in the future, I could have popped up in a complete, ten times worse place. At least, here, I had Will. And Mike was being great with all this strange situation.

We walked into this little shop, filled with pictures of delicious sweets, from pancakes to ice creams and waffles. A TV was on a music channel. There was a guy with huge brown hair behind the counter and he smiled happily when he saw us.

“Look, it’s my favourite costumer!” He exclaimed, looking at Mae. She giggled. “What would you want today, Miss Mae?”

“Ice c’em!”

“Ice cream, sweetie,” Mike corrected. “But no, you can’t have that for breakfast. How about waffles?”

Mae seemed pleased with that option. Mike asked for three Breakfast Specials of Waffles. I looked at him, surprised. He apologized when we got to a table and said that it was our usual order. I told him it was okay. He smiled, pleased. Mae, who was sitting between us, tried to pick up the menu that had already been placed on the table. Mike helped her open it and then let his hand stay on her small back, while she pretended to read it.

“Oh, by the way, next week, we have a thing to attend,” Mike suddenly said.

I looked at him, intrigued, and noticed he was embarrassed. “What thing?”

He shrugged. “Just a small event.”

I raised one of my eyebrows and waited for him to give me more information. But Mike seemed more interested in reading the menu

with Mae.

“What thing?” I repeated.

He sighed. “Series two of my new comic book is going to be launched next week,” he finally admitted. “I need to go to this thing, show it off, talk to some people and give some autographs. Nothing big.” He talked like it wasn’t a huge deal, but it was.

“It is big!” I exclaimed, completely stunned. I knew he was a cartoonist, it was on the list, but I didn’t know he was having such a success! “Series two? And you thing that is a small thing?”

He shrugged. “It isn’t important compared to what is happening right now...”

I shook my head. No, I couldn’t let him think like that. I couldn’t just wake up in this reality and mess everything up. I was trying to find my place, my purpose here, but I wouldn’t just let them stop living because of that.

“Mike, it’s huge. And I’m pretty sure I must have been proud... Right? Before...” He nodded, a small smile appearing on his face. “Then, I’m going to be proud now as well.”

“You could just not care,” he said. “I wouldn’t blame you.”

Steve showed up on that precise moment with our breakfasts. He placed down three plates of waffles with whipped cream and chocolate liquid on them, followed by three glasses of strawberry juice. We thanked him.

Mike started to cut Mae’s waffle into little pieces, so she didn’t have trouble eating. Her glass of juice had two big, pink straws in it. She giggled, sucking on it and making bubbles out of the juice. Mike told her to stop.

What kind of mother was I? As I looked at a smiling Mae eating her waffle and a quiet Mike, giving her side glances that made them both laugh, I wondered what my part in this small family was. Was I good? Could I be good?

*How can you dislike children?* I suddenly heard my mom's voice in my head. I was nineteen and was having dinner with her and her boyfriend, Martin. I had just told them I wasn't considering becoming a mom, or a wife.

*I never said I disliked children. I just don't want to have one of my own,* I had replied, *I'm allowed to choose my own future, aren't I?*

Once again, the theory of me being in an alternative reality sounded like the most reasonable of all the options considered. Why was I here, though? That was a question still very unanswered and I was pretty sure I was far from understanding it. I mean, it could just be some divine force showing me how my life could have turned out to be if I had chosen to have a family. Or it could have been a celestial mistake? A universe error?

I should really just try to find a way out of here instead of understanding it.

Right?

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Max was a red-haired woman around my age. She had freckles and green eyes. She was lovely, really. Had a gentle voice and a sweet smile. The way she looked at Dustin told me that there was something going on between them. I wondered if the other me knew about them, or it was something she speculated as well.

The first thing she asked me on Tuesday morning was how Mae was doing. I told her everything was fine now. Then, she asked me about the traffic since I had arrived almost twenty minutes late.

I had a freaking car. It was the company's car, yes, but still, it was mine. It was in *my* garage, *I* was the one that had the key. I had been so shocked that morning, when Mike told me that, yes, I might have been a bit late because of that, and also the traffic had been a bit terrible.

Dustin, whose office was a door away from ours, popped up around lunch time to eat with us. Usually, for what I could tell, we would go somewhere to have lunch, but the film festival that we were apparently arranging was a bit late and we needed to hurry up. The idea was to catch people's attention to see the wonders of short films making. We were trying to find directors and actors available to come to the festival. We had a few already, but Dustin, for some reason, really wanted this couple, a director and a photographer, to come to it and we were having a difficult time contacting them.

"I just need them to answer an e-mail, like honestly how hard is it?" He grumbled, before eating a cookie from Max's plastic container. Dustin had brown, curly hair and adorable dimples. He also had a bit of an accent, which made me laugh.

"Just relax. We can always find someone else to come," Max said, passing the container of cookies to me. I took one out. "Or we can ask El to ask her sister-in-law to come. She is an amazing screenplay writer. And dancer."

I blinked, confused. I had a sister-in-law? Why didn't Mike put that on the list?!

"Well, her dancing qualities aren't really important to the festival, are they?" Dustin replied. "I mean, being a screenplay writer, yes..." He looked at me. "Can you talk to her?"

I nodded, trying very hard not to look guilty. I didn't even know her name, geez. I had to call Mike before they bomb me with another surprise.

I excused myself for five minutes and took my phone with me. Mike answered my call after three rings.

"Yes?"

"You have a sister?!"

"Ah, two, actually. Why?"

"Dustin and Max talked about one of them and I didn't know!"

He chuckled. "Sorry. But yeah, Nancy is a screenplay writer and Holly is a teenager who loves watching TV shows and pretends to be some kind of a superior human being. Like an angel. Or a demon." I was pretty sure there was a joke there that I didn't catch.

"Well, they want to invite Nancy to the film festival. What do you think?" I looked down the hallway, seeing some people talking by a coffee machine. From the office's half-opened door, I could hear Max and Dustin chatting.

"I think she'll be up to it, yeah."

I finished my call with Mike a few minutes later. He told me he was going to take Mae to the park since she was throwing a fist about being at home. Bossy thing, she was. I giggled and wished him good luck.

"Oh God, you are so in love. It's disgusting", Max complained when I entered our office. I stared at her, confused. She snorted. "Every time, El, you call your husband, you just come back with this stupid smile on your face. Honestly, it's disgusting. Stop being so happy." Dustin laughed at her dramatic voice.

I frowned. Was I smiling that much because of my conversation with Mike? Maybe she was just associating me with the other-El. After all, she didn't know what was happening. And, of course, she was going to assume I was in love with Mike. He was my husband.

## 6. The supermarket trip

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for reading and commenting!

I was finding it hard to do my job. I mean, all the qualification that had actually got me the job in the first place wasn't really in me anymore. I was still in second year of college. At least, in my head, I was. In my universe, I was.

Mike told me to take it easy. I could be a people's person, even though I didn't believe in it (and I didn't. The only times I could be a people's person was when I was drunk at parties), and, most importantly, I had this fire inside of me that kept me going and didn't allow me to give up (Funnily enough, Dad used to say that to me as well. *Kiddo, you have the world in you. Use it.*) So, yes, I could put together a film festival. And I had Max and Dustin's help to do it so. Of course, I knew their help was supposed to calm me down, but it wasn't that easy. Max and Dustin didn't know I wasn't their El. And they couldn't know.

"Why, afraid they'll think you cray-cray?" Mike joked. I stopped washing one of the plates from dinner and gave him a grumpy stare. He chuckled. "They wouldn't."

"Not everyone is as cool with this as you," I replied.

Mike didn't say anything. He took the wet plate from my hand and cleaned it up with a cloth. I noticed his easy smile had vanished from his face. Maybe I said something wrong? But how should I know?

I had been stuck on this life for a week and a half now. Will called me almost every day, seeing how I was. We went for a quick dinner once and he and Lucas came to have lunch with us on Sunday. Lucas was more okay with me now. I wasn't sure if Will had told him the truth. I hoped not.

Mike was being amazing. He always answered my questions, even the stupid ones. He told me little things about our married life. I mean,

his and other El's married life. When I asked him about the mouth-breather paper on the wall, he told me that was one of my nicknames for him. I called him that when he was being silly, or when I wanted to be sweet (I snorted at that point and he said that, yeah, I sucked at being romantic.) One day, I just decided to put the word up on the wall so he could wake up every day, look at it and remember that he was a mouth breather. My mouth breather.

He also said we preferred staying at home than going out. We were kind boring, according to him. But that was the now. I had a feeling that we hadn't always been that boring. We couldn't have been. That wasn't me.

*Well, this isn't you. This is other-El's life. Maybe she's boring.*

Yeah, maybe falling in love, getting married and having a kid was easy for other-El. Sometimes it was hard to remember that she and I weren't the same person, even though we were. *Every day you're one step closer to going bananas, Eleven, honestly.*

"Hey, can I ask you something?" I started. Mike gave me a *duh* look, that made me smile a bit. "You never told me about... being Samantha's date and... all. Like, how did that happen?"

I knew I had asked a confusing question, but Mike seemed to understand what I wanted as an answer.

"She and I met through a friend. A guy called Zack. We were all hanging out at this guy's place, no idea who it was now, and she turned to me and said there was going to be a party and that I should come. I said, sure, why not? We exchanged phone numbers. Then, she sent me the party's address a couple days later and I, being the complete gentleman that my mother taught me to be, was late for it because I had this huge essay to give in until midnight of that day..." He gave me this funny look. "Mom also taught me to be smart, so you see, so I had to choose between party and academic success and honestly I'm..."

"Mike," I stopped him with a giggle. "You're losing track of the story."



“Yup, sorry. Well, anyways, when I got there, I saw you, drunk asleep, and I took pity on you and took care of you and blah blah...”

“No blah, blah,” I said, shaking my head. I gave him the last plate to clean. “Tell me. Tell me our story.” *Tell me your and other-El's story and let me pretend for a few minutes it's mine.*

“El,” he sighed. “Let me clean this, okay?”

I nodded. I dried my hands in another cloth and then, together, we sat on the sofa. Mae was on the floor, wrapped in her favourite pink blanket, watching *Mulan*. She was loving it.

I made myself comfortable, grabbing a pillow and holding it on my lap. Mike was a bit nervous. So, I said, “Just start from the beginning.”

He gave me a weak smile.

“Well, I told you that you punched me at the party, after waking up, right?” I nodded, giving him once again a guilty look. He shook his head, like saying it was okay. “Then, ... what happened was that... you got up and tried to escape.” He snorted, like the idea of someone thinking they had to escape from him was amusing. “Ended up throwing up on the floor.” I groaned. Of course, I threw up. That last shot I took with Samantha was two times bigger than the usual. And it had been a whiskey shot. Mike chuckled, more confident. “Then, out of the blue, you said you wanted French fries. You were so wasted that I went with you. I bought you a hot dog and French fries. We shared a water. We talked for a while. Walked around... Finally, I took you home.” I was somehow surprised and touched by how ordinary and easy his story, “our” past, was going... Maybe it was because Mike had shown goodness in him, despite drunk me punching him. He had been sweet, taking care of a stranger. Was he always like that?

Something in me said he was.

Mike continued the story, “Then, the next day, I get a call from Samantha and it's actually you, asking me to go study to a small café you knew. I said, sure. And... we became friends.”

*Oh, thank God.* Becoming actual friends with the friend I had made on a drunk night? Yup. That seemed something that I would be up to.

“Then, we started-” He stopped again. “Mae, maybe it’s time for bed.”

I frowned, confused, and then watched him grab Mae, who complained, and take her to the bedroom. I still couldn’t do the goodnight thing with Mae. It just seemed like something that I shouldn’t take from the other-El, if that made any sense. Of course, Mae had noticed that her mother wasn’t tucking her into bed every night. Sometimes she would get sad about it, Mike as well, but I still couldn’t bring myself to do it. And I had the right to do so, Will had told me a few days ago during a phone call. I knew nothing about this. I wasn’t going to become the perfect wife and mother just because the universe decided to joke with me.

I read a few more things about alternative realities. It was just theory, obviously. There were of course incidents happening throughout history, but nothing actually real. And, if this was really happening, if I was indeed in another reality, living another-me life, there was another question bothering me: why me? There were more than seven billion people living on this planet. Why pick me? Why do this to me? What did I have to be more special than the rest? And, most importantly, what was the point of showing me this life that could have been mine, but it wasn’t?

Mike came back. He was looking uneasy. When he sat down next to me, I touched his hand carefully. It was warm and filled with little freckles, just like his face and arms.

“Mae misses you in these moments,” he confessed. “I understand your side... She doesn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “It’s other-El that should be doing that.”

Mike didn’t believe my theory of being in another reality. He said it would make more sense if I was dreaming or experiencing my future. I understood his point of view, and his implied question: Why should he be an alternative reality? Why couldn’t he be real for me, for this El?

*This El didn't like love a lot*, I answered the question in my head.

"Can you continue the story?" I asked, changing the topic. "Please."

He sighed and nodded. His hand moved away from mine. "Well, one day, we were at your place, drunk on vodka, I think Will and Lucas were there, but Samantha had gone out that night... Anyways, we kissed. Out of the blue. We were listening to music, dancing around the four of us and... We kissed." He gave me a short glance. "That's when we started fooling around... You didn't want anything serious, that was something you made clear even when we were just friends. You said you were young and the point of being stuck with someone for the rest of your life didn't please you, although you could see why..."

"Why some people choose it," I completed. "Love is one of the most human desires there is... People love to be loved."

"Yeah..." He cleared his throat. "I was okay with it," he continued, "I didn't want anything serious as well. I had had two girlfriends before. Things just didn't work out because we didn't like each other that much. In both cases. And we were young. We still are..." He coughed. "It was simple, really. You and I... We usually made out a lot when we were drunk at parties." He gave me a sly smirk. I rolled my eyes at him. "Hook up, yeah, to low our stressing levels from college." I snorted at that. "That was really what we used to say to each other. I would call, you would call, saying *hey, I need to distress*. And that meant spending a day in bed."

I smiled. That seemed nice. That seemed like something I would be up to. Mike, as far as I could tell, was trustworthy. Being in a friends-with-benefits kind of relationship with him didn't sound bad. It sounded really easy. And I was always up to whatever was easiest. Will used to say that I ignored this adventurous side of me that was begging to come out and do something challenge, once in a while. That I should put myself out there more often.

"So, what changed?" I asked. When did we become so serious? What had happened for us to decide that just having sex wasn't enough?

"One day... Well, one night," he corrected himself, "we went out, to

drink as usual (Wednesdays were so terrible for our livers, honestly), and we were at this park. There was a smart concert going on, loud music, people dancing. We started dancing with each other as well, being complete assholes. Terrible dancers.” He smiled hearing my laugh. “Then, a slow song came on... Really inappropriate for the moment. But you put your arms around me to slow dance. I was shocked, really, because we were never like that with each other. I mean, we spent a lot of time together, yeah, but we weren’t sweet to each other, really. You know, we tended to keep our distance and-“

“Mike,” I interrupted. He blushed. “What changed?” I repeated my question.

He stared at me, our eyes fixed on each other, and there was so much love in his expression, so much warmth and gentleness, that I felt like melting; that I felt safe. His presence was enough for me.

“You told me you loved me,” he said. “You looked me in the eyes and drunk told me that you loved me. That was what changed.

I didn’t know how to react. Mike lowered his eyes, playing with his fingers nervously. The last person I had said those words had been my dad, a few days before he died. We had been at a neighbour’s barbecue, socializing (“Because socializing is good, right?” He had chuckled, making mom roll her eyes.). Thinking about it made me sad. Remembering Dad bragging about me, his daughter, his perfect, sweet daughter who was a genius. Sarcastically, I had replied “Love you too, Dad”. And that was it. The last time I had ever used the word “love” to describe what I felt about anyone.

I stopped using it with my mom after dad died. I could see her pain, her grief, and understand that we were both in the same boat, suffering, being miserable, yet I could never bring myself to tell her that I, her daughter, loved her and was still here for her. After she started dating Martin Brenner, and God I still remembered the day he showed up at dinner time and she introduced him to me... It had crushed me. So, of course, after that, it became more of a choice not to say those words to my mom. Because, to me, she didn’t deserve it.

“El?”

I looked at Mike. He seemed worried, so I smiled weakly.

“Let’s go to bed?” He asked. I nodded.

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Today was the official presentation of Mike’s new comic book. He had to leave early in the morning to go meet some people whose identities I didn’t catch. He said their names, like I was supposed to know them (he was so excited, he couldn’t stop smiling), and then, dressed in a nice, blue shirt and black jeans, he left in a hurry.

I decided to take Mae to the supermarket. The list on the fridge had grown longer and it was time to buy some groceries. So, I dressed Mae in a cute, yellow dress, which she picked herself from her wardrobe, and a pair of brown, little shoes. She was lovely.

I took the elevator to the garage floor and then, with Mae on my arms, I made my way to my car. It was black and it had the company’s name on the back, Sign-Me-Up. There was a special seat for Mae. I helped her get her seat belt, which was something very exciting to her. Turned out, she loved being in a moving car. She looked out of the window with this amazed look that made me smile. She talked about the people, the dogs she saw, everything. Of course, some of the times I had to correct her pronunciation.

This trip to the supermarket was a way to get to know little Mae better. I might not be the real version of her mother, but she didn’t know that. And she was a lovely kid, who I didn’t mind learning more about. It was also a way to understand how my life here was. How I interact with people outside and inside my little family. Mae was important. And she was a safe place. She was so young she didn’t see the world like sad-and-overwhelmed-by-life adults did. She was pure and somehow that could help me be at peace with what was happening to me.

I put her inside a shopping cart. I tried to sit her in the small, metal seat, but she refused, wanting to stand up in the cart. I found out that

it helped her grab things and join them to our groceries; things like cookies, and chocolate. She had a sweet tooth. I could relate to that.

We were in the fruit aisle, picking up some strawberries and bananas. Mae was sneakily eating a grape that she took from one of the bunches. I gave her a small glance and she giggled. That's when I saw him. Tall, blonde with the cockiest smirk I had ever seen. Matt O'Bryan had been that guy at my first college party that I had set my eyes on and thought: *yup, I need to kiss him at least once.*

Last time I had ever been this close to him was during a study session among Film Studies students. He had showed up late, with that stupid smirk on his face, and sat down next to me like everything was totally okay between us. It wasn't. Not since he had spread around the campus the stupid, completely untrue story that we had hooked up in a bathroom. Asshole. Yet, one of the hottest guys I had ever seen.

Matt saw me, blinked in surprise and then walked up to me with a smirk on his face. "Jane, hello." He never got around the idea of calling me El, or Eleven. He had always preferred Jane.

"Hello, Matt. Long time no see," I said, assuming that what I was saying was accurate. Mae looked at him with her mouth opened and confused.

"True, true," he replied chuckling. "This is Mae?"

I blinked. "Yes," I said. How did he know my daughter's name?

"I've seen pictures of her in Will's Facebook. Never seen you, though. How is life treating you?"

"Great."

"Still with Mike?"

I was again surprised with his knowledge of my life. Had he met Mike? In what sort of occasion could they have met?

"Of course," I said somehow proudly. He chuckled. "What about you?"

“Still living the dream.” He had this smug smirk on his face that I wanted to rip off. “I’m a producer.”

I tried not to snort. Right. Like I would buy that.

“Congrats,” I wished with a forced smile. Mae tried to steal another grape. I stopped her this time and said to Matt, “Well, good to see you, Matt.”

“Bye, Jane,” he said with that stupid smirk that had once made me want to kiss him badly. “See you around.”

Like hell I would see him around.

I pushed the shopping cart around him and walked away, turning to the aisle on the left. It was the wine section. I just kept going.

Mae asked who that man was, of course. I said an old friend, while trying to choose between two mustard packages. One was way more expensive than the other. I frowned.

“Why old?” She asked me.

I sighed, putting down one of the mustard packages. I told her, “Well, life tends to make people grow up, Mae. Some don’t. That’s why he is an old friend.”

She seemed confused with my answer.

*El, honestly, don’t make all men be assholes because most of them are,* I heard Samantha’s voice tell me, after I came home furious at the people who were talking trash behind my back. Oh, some of them did have the guts to tell me in the face that I was a total slut. Like, excuse me, but one, it was my body; two, I did whatever I wanted; and three, neverminding the fact that they shouldn’t be calling that name, they were doing it because of a lie. And that made me so angry.

But no, I didn’t see all men like assholes. My dad hadn’t been one. Neither was Will. But Matt O’Bryan was and, good Lord, after what he had done, I craved some kind of revenge badly. That was the only thing I thought about for weeks, until Will and Samantha took me on a small two-days trip and had a “Let’s rehab El’s poor and wicked

soul” holiday. It was really good. We did nothing special, but it made me wonders.

“Mommy, mommy,” Mae called. We were in the supermarket line, our groceries already checked. I just froze for a moment, thinking about the life I had been living, my real life, not this alternative place, and I totally forgot where I was. I paid in cash, got my change and took Mae and two bags of groceries with me to the car.

I got one last glance of Matt, getting into his car a few parking spots away from mine. I shook my head and then drove away from there. I knew my way around this part of the city since the flat I shared with Mike in this life was so close to where I used to live in my years of college. I even passed my old street on my way home. I took a quick peep at the flat that just a week and half ago I had been sharing with Will and Samantha. I also saw the park where my special spot, the one I had a small memorial to my dad, was. I had to go there some day. Not today since Mike needed my presence. And, although I only knew him for a few days, I wanted him to know that I was really happy for his career. The other El, the one married to him, certainly was.

I wondered if she was living my life, since I was living hers. How weird would it be, waking up and being twenty again? Not having Mike and Mae with her... Maybe she felt lost without them.

I looked at Mae through the mirror in the car. She was mumbling the song that was on the radio.

“Are you happy?” I asked her. I was an idiot sometimes.

Mae looked at me, frowned in confusion, and then giggled. “Silly mommy.”

Yeah, silly me.



## 7. The song

I dressed myself more nicely for Mike's presentation. I chose a blue blouse and dark jeans from the wardrobe, and then found some simple jewellery in this small box on the desk we had in the bedroom. It was a necklace with a small, silver feather, and a dark-blue ring that went on my thumb. I recognized some of the bracelets. I had them since I was a teenager. I tried to put one around my wrist, but then stopped. I thought the necklace and the ring were enough. Maybe some other time.

Around midday, I left the flat with Mae again. I had the address for the place where Mike's comic book presentation was being held. He had written it on a small paper and given it to me this morning.

I was really excited about the event. Mae had the biggest smile on her face, knowing that she was going to see daddy soon. Will and Lucas were going to be there as well. I had already received a message from Will saying they were on their way. Max and Dustin, after a long and exhausting afternoon of trying to put together the goddamn film event that was going to happen during three days in one month and two weeks, promised me they would try to stop by later on. Dustin was sure he was going to have to work during the weekend. Max was probably going to help him. I didn't know if I should have also volunteered to do some more work as well, after the book presentation, but it was Mike's day today and he had been really sweet with me, although I wasn't really his wife. So, I remained quiet, accepting the fact that two my co-workers were probably – most likely – not going to show up today and stay at home working.

The address I had was for a restaurant. I frowned, confused. Was I at the right place? I looked at my phone, where I had inserted the address in this map app and it said I had arrived at my destination.

I parked the car in the first free parking spot I could find. I undid Mae's belt and took her out of the car. I had to walk a bit until the restaurant, holding an excited Mae in my arms, who kept pointing at things that fascinated her little mind.

When I got to the restaurant, Mike came out, talking to someone

behind him. He suddenly stopped, seeing us, and smiled.

"Hey you two!" He greeted and gave Mae a big kiss on the cheek. Then, he looked at me hesitantly. "Hug?"

I nodded. "Of course."

He put his arms around me, taking Mae into the hug as well, and my chin unconsciously laid on shoulder. He smelled nice.

"Listen," he started, stepping back, "today you're going to meet Gary. He is kind of my agent. He is great. You two have met. He will probably ask you about the film festival." I made a face when he said that, which made him chuckle. "Don't worry. I'll try and keep him busy."

"And the presentation is going to be in a restaurant?" I asked, confused.

"Oh, no. That's where we will have lunch. It will be at this bookstore nearby."

"Then, why give me this address?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Can't I have lunch with my family and closest friends?"

"Yes, of course", I replied. "I just... I didn't know we had a restaurant reservation. You could have told me."

His smile faded away. And I knew that he had told me about the reservation. He probably had told me weeks ago.

No, not me. His wife, El.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

He shook his head. "It's okay." A smile forced its way into his lips. "Let's go eat? Will and Lucas are inside, waiting."

I nodded, trying to put behind me this awkward and terrible moment. Sometimes I would get so comfortable with Mike that I forgot this life

I was living wasn't really mine.

"I was actually coming outside to call you and see where you to were," he said, opening the door for me and Mae.

"Traffic sucks," I complained.

He led us to a small table near the restaurant's back. Will and Lucas were sitting side to side and, when we arrived, they stood up to greet me and Mae. There was a baby chair for her to sit down. Will asked me if everything was okay while we hugged. I nodded and gave him a small smile as we pulled away.

We spent almost two hours in the restaurant, having a lovely lunch. Lucas was nicer to me, although there were moments in which I would catch him staring at me like he was trying to figure me out. Will, of course, would always notice his stare and call his attention to something. Mike was so excited that he didn't notice any weird stares, or silences. His right knee was always going up and down under the table eagerly.

The presentation was going to begin at three pm. Since we were walking there, we left around two pm, after sharing the bill (Lucas had insisted to do so). Mike said he had to be there half an hour earlier, or Gary would kill him.

When we got to the bookshop, we were surprised to see such a big line in front of it. Mike's eyes were sparkling in happiness, his arms tightened around Mae, who he had been holding the entire trip. She giggled at her dad's enthusiasm.

"Oh, man, this is so awesome!" Lucas said, patting Mike's back.

"You deserve it, Mike," Will added with a proud smile.

I touched his arm. He had really been holding back on me. People loved his work. He was a success. He gave me a silly smile and a shrug, like it still wasn't a big deal. I got over the fact that this wasn't my life, this wasn't my reality, and leaned over to give him a kiss on the cheek. Mike blushed.

Getting closer to the door, some of the people in line said hi to him

very excitedly and tried to make conversation. There was one guy who actually wanted his picture.

A tall man, with broad shoulders, opened the door for us to enter. Mike waved at the people in line one last time, and Mae copied him.

There was a red carpet inside, guiding us to a table full of copies of Mike's new comic book. I grabbed one, interested, and saw it was about superheroes. The cover had two guys in masks fighting. It was called *The A.V. Club Gang*. I frowned at the name and called Mike quietly. He let Mae into Will's arms before walking up to me.

"Why this title?" I whispered so no one could hear us. How bad would it look if his own wife didn't know this kind of things about his work?

He chuckled. "That's how the two main characters met and got their powers. They were in an A.V. Club in their high school, one day there was this huge electrical breakdown and they got electrified. Then, the powers happened."

"It sounds interesting," I replied honest.

He smiled. "You gave the name," he said. I looked at him in shock. "Yeah, I had two titles and I couldn't decide, so I asked you to choose for me."

"Wow," I let out. "I picked right, huh?"

He laughed. Naively, he wrapped his arm around my waist. I blinked surprised, but then pulled myself closer to him. "Yup, you did," he answered. "You don't know it, but you are my greatest inspiration," he added shyly.

I put down the comic book copy and hugged him, to his surprise.

"Thank you," I said.

"For what?" He whispered in my ear.

I shrugged. "Just thanks, I guess," I replied.

*Thanks for being so great with this all situation and for making other-El, the one that belonged here, so happy.* Because I could honestly feel some of her happiness. Mike was amazing.

Around three and fifteen, the doors opened. Mae was still in Will's arms, who kept his distance from the line that was filling the bookstore. Mike was standing behind the table with a huge smile. Gary, a short guy with a moustache, was standing next to me, looking proud. He did try to talk to me about the film festival, but was silent by the beginning of Mike's speech.

Always with a huge and excited smile, Mike thanked the people for coming to the presentation. He said he hoped they would enjoy this new series of *The A.V. Club Gang* as much he enjoyed drawing it. Then, he started signing copies and handing them out to the fans. I stayed in the back with Will and Lucas. Gary went to his side, being a good agent, giving him quiet advices once in a while.

After a while, Mae started to turn in Will's arms, trying to get out and go to her dad as well. She squirmed so much and was actually starting to whimper that I grabbed her and, to distract her, decided to walk around in the area of the bookstore that wasn't filled with people. I showed her some books with pictures, but her head was always turning to where Mike was.

"Mommy, daddy," she asked holding her little finger in Mike's direction. I sighed.

"She has always been a daddy's girl."

I quickly turned around. There was this beautiful woman standing behind me. She was wearing this lovely, red dress that fitted her body perfectly. She was small and thin, had blue eyes, and curly brown hair. The way she looked at me told me that she knew me. And I had to know her. I forced a smile.

"Yeah, that's true," I replied.

I looked behind her and saw Will whispering something in Lucas's ear. Thankfully, he noticed me and the woman. He walked up to us with a big smile.

“Nancy!” He greeted happily. “Here to see your little brother’s success?”

I sighed in relief. Thank God I had Will.

So, this was Nancy. The screenplay writer. The one that Dustin wanted me to invite to the film festival. The sister that Mike had yet forgotten to show me a picture.

“Of course. I wouldn’t miss it,” she replied, hugging him back. Then, she turned back to me and gave me a suspicious glance. “So, El, are you okay?”

“I’m great,” I replied. “Just woke up with a headache today, unfortunately. I took an aspirin, but I still have... you know, some moments...” I quieted myself, sure that my explanation didn’t help at all. Nevertheless, I said the truth. Every single day, I opened my eyes in the morning and my head felt like exploding. Waking up with a hangover, despite not drinking the previous night, was no fun.

“Oh, I understand. Putting up with Mike every day can give a person a terrible headache,” Nancy replied jokingly.

I chuckled hesitant. Was I supposed to laugh at the joke? What did other-El do in these situations?

Nancy, with this lovely expression, stretched out her arms in Mae’s direction.

“Care to say hi to your favourite auntie, Mae?”

Mae giggled and leaned over to Nancy. I let her go. Nancy took her into her arms and touched her curly black hair. “Looking so cute, aren’t you? And this yellow dress, oh, adorable!”

I smiled at them. Will gave me one last look, making sure I was okay with Nancy, and then went back to Lucas.

“My brother is a success, isn’t he?” Nancy was trying to be polite. Or maybe this was really the kind of relationship we had.

“Yes,” I answered. “He is so happy.”

“And you too,” she noticed. Thank God. “Mike told me a couple days ago that you were interested in having me coming to some film festival?”

I blinked, surprised.

“Oh, yes,” I said, controlling a big smile. Mike was truly an angel. “My department is organizing an event about short films making. Dustin, I don’t know if you know him...” She gave me a small nod, followed by a weird look. Yup, I had screwed up there. But I kept going. “Well, he asked me if I could talk to you. It will be a three-day event. You just have to come one of the days, talk about your work, you know? Show some of it, if you don’t mind.”

“That sounds lovely,” she replied with a sincere smile. “Just mail me more details and I’ll tell you if I’m available, yes?”

I nodded excited. “Yes, of course. Thank you so much for doing this.”

Nancy shook her head, while playing with Mae’s hair. “We’re a family, El. There’s no need to thank me.”

I smiled softly. My eyes went to Mike, who was talking to a fan and laughing. Will and Lucas were standing by the line, chuckling about something as well. Nancy was making little Mae giggle.

Yup, the other-El was living a great life here.

---

We got home around seven pm. I was really tired and my feet hurt from standing all afternoon. I had worn some fancy, flat shoes and my feet were sore. I couldn’t even imagine Nancy who had had high heels on.

While Mike, who was still high on enthusiasm from the success of his comic book presentation, gave Mae a shower, I tried to cook some decent food. I was only twenty in my genuine life, okay? Cooking had its ups and downs. Samantha had always been the grand chef, not

me.

I did my favourite dish, pasta with tomato sauce and mushrooms cut into small pieces. I hoped they liked it. Dad used to make this for me when I was young.

And, yes, it was my favourite because he was the one used to cook it. Mom's cooking was good, but whenever dad decided to do it, it just made it more special. I just loved joining him in the kitchen and helping him cook.

I controlled a sudden sadness that threatened to invade me, while stirring the sauce carefully. Dad said the secret of turning an old and boring recipe into an amazing dish was patience and attention. *Nothing good will come out if you aren't paying attention, nor giving it the patience it deserves, El.* Yeah, I knew, Dad. I listened to you. Even if you thought I didn't.

Suddenly, I heard laugh. Mike appeared, carrying a clean, dressed in her pyjamas Mae into the living-room, holding her above his head, and making plane noises. She was a huge bubble of giggles. I smiled at them. He suddenly stopped in front of the sofa and started to low her down slowly. She had her arms wide-opened, making a *weeeeee* sound. Mike finally laid her down on the sofa.

"There you go, miss. I hope you had a nice flight." He bowed a bit, making her laugh again. Then, he stood up and looked at me. "Some music?"

"Sure," I said.

He went to the stereo, which was resting on top of this small, wooden piece of furniture that was behind our television. Above it, there was this huge, broad window with an amazing view to the street. I did ask Mike about how we got this flat. He told me that this was where he had been living in his college years, when we first met. Back then, his roommate was this guy named Chuck. Then, when Chuck graduated, he left, moved to California to work on something in the engineering field, and I moved in.

A song that I did not recognize came on. I gave Mike a confused look.



He chuckled and told me it was a song from Ed Sheeran. It came out last year. Of course, I didn't know it. In this alternative reality, I was twenty-five and the year was 2017. Anything that has happened between my last moment in my real life, in 2012, and now, 2017, was a mystery to me. Some of the things that I found out about the past five years were really unpleasant. I hoped they didn't happen in my reality. On the other hand, Beyoncé had this really good, kicking-ass album called *Lemonade*. It was so good and made me so happy. I hoped that *that* would happen in my reality.

"Is it on the radio?" I asked.

"No, it's a CD."

"So, all songs are going to be his?"

Mike, coming closer to me, chuckled again. "No, it's a mix-CD. We chose the songs."

"How romantic," I joked.

He stopped by my side and gave me this smug look before opening the cupboard above me and taking out three plates. I rolled my eyes at him.

It was so easy to be around Mike. And he always made people feel comfortable. Maybe that was the reason why other-El married him. Or one of many reasons.

When we sat down for dinner, I was actually feeling nervous about what their thoughts on it would be. I always wanted people to like this pasta. Because it was my dad's recipe and it made me really proud when people congratulated me on the dish since I could say it was all thanks to my dad's patience and teaching skills.

Noticing my edginess, Mike grabbed one of my hands. "You do know that we have had this before, right?"

I blinked.

"It was your dad's recipe," he said my exact thoughts. "Don't be nervous around us, El. I've told you... trust me."

"I trust you," I replied sincerely.

This soft, gentle melody started playing from the stereo.

Mae giggled. "Daddy, mommy song!"

I looked from her to Mike, who blushed intensely. I stayed quiet, listening to the lyrics.

*I want you*

*And I always will*

*I wish I was worth it*

*But I know what you deserve*

Mike was still holding my hand. I gave it a squeeze. He looked up at me.

"What song is this?" I asked gently.

"Oceans," he replied. "By Seafret."

I smiled softly.

"Why is it our song?" I asked.

"It was the one playing when you told me you loved me for the first time," he confessed. I gave his hand another squeeze.

I wanted to kiss him. I wanted to kiss him so badly. Not just his lips, but his face, his freckles, his eyes, everything. My heart beat fast, when I realized that I could do it. I could kiss him. So, I did. I leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the lips. Just a small taste. He stared at me, open-mouthed. Mae giggled once again.

*Please, other-El, don't be mad at me.*

I let go of his hand and grabbed the knife instead.

We ate in silence, enjoying the background music. Some of the songs were quiet, others made me want to dance. It was adorable seeing little Mae trying to sing along to some of them. Mike would try to correct her once in a while, particularly the words that she was supposed to already know.

After cleaning the dishes and putting the leftovers in some containers, Mike and I joined Mae on the sofa. She was watching cartoons, as usual, but Mike took the remote control from her little hands, and said it was daddy and mommy's turn to watch some TV. Mae pouted. Trying to ignore her, Mike changed the channel, finding something else to watch.

"Daddyyyy," she complained and tried to grab the remote from his hands.

"Maeeee," he imitated her tone.

I chuckled. Mae turned her head to me, pouting. *Oh, I see.* Now she was trying to play me.

"Oh, don't you turn to your mother now!" Mike seemed offended. "El, don't give in!"

I laughed again and took Mae, into my arms, tickling her. She giggled, and pushed my tickling hands away. I stopped, and she made herself comfortable on my lap. She was certainly going to fall asleep in the next few minutes.

"Just put something funny on," I told Mike. He gave me a smile.

After changing the channel a few more times, Mike finally stop at one that was showing off a movie. It was already halfway through, but we settled down for it anyways.

I felt the exact moment that Mae fell asleep. I felt it in her slow breathing, the way she was holding my hand and how still she was. Mike gave her a small glance and smiled at me.

"Do you want me to take her?"

I knew that, under that simple request, he was testing me, seeing if I was ready to be her mother again. But I shook my head and He took her out of my arms and walked out of the living-room.

He didn't understand. I couldn't just barge in their lives and take someone else's place. That someone else could be exactly like me, another version of me, but she wasn't me. I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't do that to them.

I gave Mike that quick kiss and I felt like it had been too much. Although I did enjoy it very much. Mike was soft and sweet.

*He could be a promise to keep,* a voice said in my head.

"Hey."

I looked up. Mike was standing by the sofa. He gave a small nod to the TV.

"Do you want to finish it, or go to bed?"

Sleeping next to Mike every night was surprisingly fine. Even in the first days. He would respect my space. His presence actually made me sleep better.

Other-El was really lucky to have him.

"Let's go to bed," I said.

---

After work, I visited my dad's memorial tree. I looked around, seeing that area of the park empty, and jumped over the bushes. I sat down on my usual spot, putting my bag by my side. I looked at his name craved on the tree and smiled softly. Jim Hopper. The bravest man anyone could ever meet.

"Hey, Dad," I greeted. I looked up to the sky. "How is it going up there? I hope everything is okay with you." I turned my head to the

tree once again. "I'm still stuck here, in this... alternative reality. Yeah, I think it is that. It can't be anything else, you know? I can't have lost my memory... I should have regain some of it, I suppose... And it isn't a dream. Like, I've been dreaming for how long? Two weeks?" I shook my head. "Mike says it might be the future... But it isn't, is it, Dad? This isn't my future, not the one I chose. I know you would like it. I know mom would *loooove* if I just got married and have kids. But that's not the life for me."

I looked down at my wedding band, felt a smile on my face, and then started telling my dad the latest news. How I was organizing this cool film festival and it was a handful of problems, but it made me really happy every time Dustin, Max and I accomplished something. Like, when I had told them that Nancy was interested in coming, then we sent her an e-mail and she replied straightaway, accepting the invitation. Or when the photographers we had asked to cover the event were actually busy on half of the days, so we were stuck on having to find other good, in-the-budget photographers and one night I remembered Will's older brother, Jonathan, who had always been keen on photography. I talked to him and he accepted doing the job. I showed some his old works to Dustin and he simply loved him.

"Mae sneezed and the entire table got covered on orange juice," I told my dad, giggling. "It was so funny. And, oh, she learned how to say the word *preposterous*! Like, Mike and I don't even know how she gets it so well and then struggles with easier words. It's really amazing. And now she uses it for everything. Everything is preposterous to her. It's so funny."

I looked down at my ring again. It was pretty. Golden. Thin. It fitted perfectly around my finger. Sometimes, I would see Mike's ring on his hand and I would get this feeling, like I was really happy he had it on.

"Maybe I'm getting other-El's feelings. Other-El is the one I assume lives in this reality," I explained to my dad. "It makes sense, doesn't it? I need it to make sense..." I sighed. "Dad, what if I can't never go back to my real life? What if I can't find the reason why I am here?"

Of course, I didn't get any answer. I laid back against the tree behind me. Just because this life was nice, the job was cool, and Mike and

Mae were amazing, it didn't mean I wanted to stay here. It wasn't my life. Maybe, it could have been, yes, if I had decided... Maybe it could still be. If I met Mike in my actual life. If I ever found my way back to it.

Was it something that I wanted? To meet Mike and fall in love with him in my reality? Marriage and kids. A family of my own. That wasn't me. That hadn't been me since I was a kid and played with dolls; since dad would joke that he had to pay more attention to the boys, he didn't want his daughter in the wrong hands.

That's when I saw them. The hands. The cocky smirk. The evilness in the eyes. I closed my eyes and tried to control the images in my head. No, I wasn't going to remember that. I couldn't get stuck in my memories again. I couldn't let it consume.

*Go home, El, go to Mike and Mae.*

Oh God, Mike. Did he know? Did he know what had happened to me?

Then, a sudden thought occurred to me: maybe it didn't happen in this reality. Maybe the nightmares weren't part of this El's life. Maybe that was why she got to be happy and have a family; why everything seemed so perfect here. Because it was. It was so perfect that some days I just thought *yup, it is a dream.*

But what if it happened? *Dad is dead in this reality as well*, I thought. What if those hands, that smirk, those evil eyes... What if they haunted El in this reality too?

---

I got home a little before seven pm. I had told Mike that I would be late, and he had understood. When I got there, he was making dinner already. Mae was sitting on top of the table, with a book opened in her hands and rambling about the pictures she was seeing. I looked at both of them. Mike's happy greeting disappeared the moment he took

a good look at me. He knew I wasn't okay. God, he always knew when I wasn't okay.

I walked away, going into the bedroom to change to something more comfortable.

I was in the middle of putting my pyjama's pants on when my phone rang from the purse. I took it out. Will.

"Hey, how is it going?" He greeted when I picked up.

"Fine," I mumbled. "With you?"

"Oh, yeah, everything's cool. I gave this yoga class today to kindergarten kids. It was so funny. You should have seen some of –" He stopped talking out of the blue. "You're not okay."

I tried to control a sad chuckle. "You've always been good at this game."

"Yeah, well, I know you too well. What is going on?"

I licked my lips. I remembered telling Will what had happened. It was during that horrible waiting-to-be-accepted-in-college summer. Will had just got his acceptance letter and was so excited about it. I was still waiting and was on the edge of breaking down if I didn't get in. Because I couldn't stay in Hawkins. I had to leave. And, in that day, I told him why.

But did this Will know? Well, why wouldn't he, right? So, the better question to ask was if it had actually happened or not. Was Will the right person to ask? Or was it Mike?

"El?"

I shook myself out of my thoughts. I looked at the closed bedroom's door. "Can you take Mae with you to some place next Saturday?"

There was a quiet moment.

"Yeah, I guess I can... But why?"

“I just need to talk to Mike and... I need some time to prepare myself, and I honestly don't want Mae around when we talk.”

“Is everything okay?” He asked, worried. “El, you know you can-“

“Don't you worry, Will,” I interrupted him. “It's just a talk. You know, being stuck in an alternative reality brings a lot of questions. I want to talk to Mike about this and... I just think it's better not to have Mae around. I don't know. I just want to keep her out of this drama.”

He understood me and agreed to take her out on Saturday with Lucas.

When I came back to the kitchen, I told Mike that Will and Lucas were going to take Mae out on Saturday. He frowned and said okay. But he knew that it had been a request of mine.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Things are going to get a bit dark in the next chapters. I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Please tell me what you think.



## 8. The wedding

### Notes for the Chapter:

Warning: There are some dark topics in this chapter.

I was staring at a piece of paper stuck on my office's wall. Max and Dustin were discussing something about the film festival and I was staring at this paper. It was a drawing. A really good one. It reminded me of Will's drawings when we were kids. It was a wizard shooting fireballs. It was funny. I didn't understand why it was there, but I assumed it had to be important to either me or Max.

*You're drunk.*

I closed my eyes, ignoring that dreadful voice. I was at work. I had to focus. I couldn't let the past suck me in.

"I'm just saying, we need a new name!" Dustin exclaimed loudly, waking me up from my thoughts. I looked over at them. "They didn't like any of them and said that three were already been used!"

Max sighed, throwing her hands up, frustrated. "What are we going to do?"

I frowned. "What is happening?"

"Geez, El, you and Mike using the night for something else than sleeping or what?" Dustin joked. I blushed. "I went to talk to, you know, the Big Boss upstairs. He refused the names we had for the festival. And we had like five of them. You know, in case some we're good enough..." Dustin leaned back on his chair. Max gave him a sympathetic glance. "We need a new name. Something that will make people get interested. Like really interested. Something new. Different. Bang."

"Bang?" Max repeated.

"Bang, yes."

Then, he went quiet, and Max didn't say anything else. I got lost in

my thoughts again.

My eyes found another paper on the wall. This time, it was a poster from one of our old events. It had been a music one. There were a ton of instruments photoshopped on top of the blackness, and they were all upside down, following a stream of colourful musical notes. It was a very good poster.

But why were the instruments upside down?

“Upside Down,” I said out loud. That was my life right now. I was in another reality, in an upside-down place... Everything was different from what I thought my life would become. Married, kids...

Max and Dustin looked at me, confused.

“Is that a name suggestion?” Max asked.

I blinked. Was it?

“Maybe?” I replied.

“The Upside-Down Film Festival?” Dustin looked at Max, and then back to me. A huge smile appeared on his face. “It sounds interesting. I’ll put that down.” He wrote it on his notebook. We all had a notebook with *Cultural Department* written on it and the company’s name on the back. But mine was inside the desk’s drawer. I once took it out and read my own handwriting writing about films, and music and festivals, using technical expressions that I did not know about. I put the notebook away after that one time. I couldn’t touch it again. Seeing something so personal as my handwriting being used in this alternative reality made me feel sad, anxious. It was too private.

*You’re making things up, Eleven, and I won’t let you destroy my life with lies.*

I stood up. Max and Dustin jumped, scared. I mumbled something about the bathroom and got out of the office.

I washed my face. The cold water against my skin calmed me down.

Just one more day till Saturday. Then, I would get some answers.

Then, I would know.

---

On Saturday, I stayed in bed till midday. I had one of the worst headaches ever. Mike had already given me an aspirin. I tried to sleep more, but I just couldn't, not when Will and Lucas were coming to take Mae for the day and I had to talk to Mike.

I had already done a list in my head of things in common between my life and this alternative reality. I had the following things:

*Will has been my best friend since elementary school.*

*Dad is dead.*

*I have a memorial tree for him in a park.*

*I studied Film Studies at George Washington University.*

*I met Samantha.*

*Will met Lucas.*

And that was it, for now.

I couldn't even tell if having such coincidences between two realities was an ordinary trait in this whole thing of "alternative universes are actual real". That was why I needed to talk to Mike. If this was an alternative reality, like I believed it was, then I ended up in one that was very similar to my actual life. I just hoped some details weren't.

Those hands. That smirk. Those evil eyes. I hoped they didn't hurt this El as they had hurt me.

I took a deep breath. I heard voices in the living-room. Mike was talking to Will and Lucas. Mae giggled.

I knew it was Will that entered the bedroom before I even saw him.

He sat down next to me, on the edge of the bed, and gave me this weak smile.

“I’m okay,” I said. “Waking up with a shitty hangover every day isn’t cool.”

“Especially when you didn’t drink the night before,” he added.

I made a face, agreeing.

“This just proves we were so reckless back then,” he said. I gave him a grumpy stare. “It’s true, El. We were always partying and drinking... Geez. How do we even have livers?”

I shrugged.

Another thing to add to my inner list: Both Els drank too much throughout their college years.

And then, I remembered the Mike-date-with-Samantha detail. In my reality, all I knew was that Samantha had a date, who was late, for the party in which I passed out. In this reality, Mike had been Samantha’s date that night. But I couldn’t know if that was actually something in common or not.

“Are you going to be okay?” Will asked.

I nodded. “Yup. Don’t you worry about me, Willster.”

“I will always worry about you, Eleve-nest,” he replied cheekily.

*Willster and Eleve-nest are also a thing in this reality.*

He gave me a kiss on the forehead and then left the room. I heard his voice and Luca’s saying goodbye to Mike. The door closed. Mae didn’t come to say goodbye. That was Mike’s subtle way of trying not to be mad at me, but actually showing me he was a bit mad. I was starting to read him well. I made arrangements for Mae to be out of the house for the afternoon without telling him the reasons. I made him wait for those reasons.

I sighed and threw the sheets away from my body. I stood up and

went to the bathroom. I cleaned my face, washed my teeth and prepared myself for some more answers to this reality.

Mike was sitting on the kitchen table, sketching some scenes for the next volume of his comic book. He had told me that each series had ten books and that he usually had four months between each release to draw the following one.

He looked up when he heard me. I stood still by the hallways' entry. I thought that maybe I should sit down. But my body didn't react. I looked back at Mike, who was patiently waiting for me to say something.

"Do... do you know who Matt O'Bryan is?" I asked him. In my reality, Matt had been a small fling that ended badly, with him spreading rumours about me and our private life. I needed to know his role in this reality.

Mike frowned.

"Yeah. You two used to have a thing. And then he told people that you had hooked up in a bathroom or something... Right?"

I closed my eyes, defeated. That also happened to this El.

The hands. The smirk. The eyes. *Please, let that not be a coincidence.*

"Why do you ask?" Mike questioned.

"I saw him the other day, in the supermarket. He recognized me and Mae... He knew you as well."

Mike forced a small smile. "Well, you two had classes together. I would see him once a while. Every time we passed by him, you would mutter "asshole" to him."

Yup, I did that.

Mike waited quietly, once again. I took a deep breath. I felt my fingers trembling. A tenseness arose in my shoulders, making me even more nervous. No, not nervous, scared.

Those hands. That smirk. Those eyes.

“How about my mom?” I finally asked. Mike stared at me. “She hasn’t called yet. I mean, that was normal in my reality... We didn’t talk much.” Not since dad had passed away. Not since she found someone else to love. “But you haven’t mentioned her to me here... I mean, why?”

Mike stood up slowly. He opened his mouth to talk, but then regretted it. He looked down at his hands, which were carefully rearranging his drawings. He was taking his time, postponing an answer.

I took a few steps closer. “Mike, tell me.”

At last, Mike looked at me. “Four years ago,” he started. Four years. We had knowing each other for a year then. Maybe dating for a few months. “I was with you, at your place, when your mother called. She...” He hesitated. “She invited you to her wedding.”

Everything stopped.

Wedding.

My mother got remarried.

And, although I knew the answer, I had to ask, “To... who-whom?”

Mike hesitated. I saw the pain in his eyes. And, God, I knew.

“To whom?” I repeated, tears threatening to fall down.

“Martin,” he finally answered.

I let out a painful sound and started crying. Mike came closer to me, tried to touch me, to calm me down, but I backed away. I sobbed loudly.

“El, please, take it easy.”

She married him. She married Martin fuckin’ Brenner.

"Please," I started, "tell me that... tell me that-" I sobbed - "that it didn't... it didn't..."

Mike understood what I meant. And the look on his face made me cry even more. It had happened in this reality too. Martin Brenner had hurt me in this reality too.

*"You're drunk", he told me, sitting on my dad's armchair.*

*I snorted, a bit drunk. "It's the whole point of parties, you know," I replied. "Drink a bit too much."*

*"Your mom was worried," he replied, standing up slowly. He had always been that kind of man that liked doing things slow. Eat slow, walk slow, talk slow. Annoyingly slow. "I had to give her a pill to sleep."*

*I was standing in the middle of the hall. The stairs were right in front of me, but I was too dizzy to climb them. I had thought to fall asleep on the sofa, if Martin hadn't been here.*

*"Well, she doesn't need to worry about me, I told her where I went," I said coldly. "I'm fineeee-"*

His hand grabbed my arm and I almost tripped.

*"See, you're so drunk you can't even stand on your own," he grumbled.*

*But I had almost tripped because of his grip. He was holding me too aggressively. It was hurting me.*

*"Let's go to bed, Eleven, shall we?"*

*I made a face and tried to get away from his hand. But he just gripped my arm more brutally. I could feel his fingers touching my skin, pressing against it, hurting me.*

*"Let me go," I asked in a quiet voice.*

*"To bed, Eleven," he said coldly and pushed me up the stairs.*

*I almost tripped again, but he pulled me up and mumbled something under his breath. My door was the last one, after my dad's old office and the*

*bathroom. He opened it, pushed me inside and, to my horror, walked in after me.*

*He locked the door.*

“El, please, calm down.”

Mike’s voice woke me up from my memories. I was grasping my own hair, pulling it so hard that it should hurt. But I didn’t feel anything. Tears kept falling down my face. Mike tried to hug me. I pushed back.

My mom married Martin fuckin’ Brenner.

She married the guy that had raped me.

“Sit down, please,” Mike begged in a kind voice and took me to the sofa. I let him guide me. I couldn’t see anything through the tears, through the pain. I felt like I was suffocating.

We sat down. He had a hand on my back, trying to comfort me. But nothing couldn’t comfort me.

My mother married Martin Brenner. My mother... Was that why we stopped talking? Did I tell her and she... she...

“She knew and...”

“She never knew, El,” Mike interrupted my assumption. I looked at him in shock. “She never knew what happened... She still doesn’t.” I kept staring at him. He cleaned the tears on my face, but they just got replaced by others. “That day... When she called and told you... you lost your mind. I was there to calm you down. That’s when you told me... That’s when-“ He interrupted himself, anger bubbling inside of him. Mike knew what Martin Brenner had done to me. And he still loved me? “And I told you, El, I *begged you* to tell your mom the truth. But you just couldn’t...”

*"Daddy, no, don't hurt him," I begged my dad, who was pointing his gun at a racoon. It was eating our garbage, making a mess of our kitchen's floor.*



*"Jane, it will just come back if I don't kill it" Dad replied.*

*"But, daddy, noo," I begged. I was six years old.*

*He sighed, put the gun down and grabbed the broom. He kicked the racoon out of the house.*

*"Honestly, Jane, you're too good for this world."*

I sobbed loudly. Mike pulled me to a hug. He caressed my hair, kissed my forehead, tried to make me feel safe.

I put my mother's feelings above mine. Of course, I did. That was something I had always done. Put others first, so that they wouldn't feel alone, and sad, or trapped. They had me to help them. They had me to pour their feelings into. No, no they. She did. My mother did.

*"He was my husband too, Jane!" She exclaimed. "But he wanted me to be happy. Why can't you?"*

*"Because it's too soon!" I yelled back. Martin was standing near my mother, holding her shoulders, protecting her. I had no one behind me. I had no protection.*

*"It has been four years, Jane, four long years," she replied, crying. "I deserve this."*

*"And I deserve my dad alive."*

"What-" I looked up at Mike, sobbing – "What happened, then? Why... don't we talk?"

Why wasn't my mother in touch with me, then? If I didn't tell her what kind of monster she got married into, then what?

"I punched him in the face," Mike confessed. I looked up at him in shock. "At their wedding. Yeah, we went to their wedding. You asked me to go with you..." Mike licked his lips, hesitantly to carry on. "He started saying these things to me... Like, how you were this spoiled, ungrateful girl who didn't understand how the adult world worked. The way he was talking, so slowly, you know, and his tone of voice... like he was superior to us... I just... I punched him. And your mother

got mad. You two fought.”

I touched his face. Mike stared at me with such a gentle look. He had tears in his eyes as well, ready to carry my pain, to make me forget how bad people could be.

I never knew what that was like. To have someone to share my pain with.

“Your mom,” he started, “said that she didn’t like me, that wasn’t invited to the family and we should break up. And you told her that, well, too bad, you liked me just fine and, guess what, she was the one not invited to our family and-“

I kissed him. I couldn’t hold it anymore. I kissed him passionately. His hands came to my face, holding me gently. His lips were soft, matching mine carefully, showing me that he was here, he loved me, and everything would be okay.

He made everything okay.

I pushed myself onto his lap, forcing him to lean back on the sofa. My tongue met his, his hands met the skin under my t-shirt, I pulled his hair gently, caressed his face, his lips never leaving mine. He was gentle. He was a cup of hot chocolate in a cold, winter day. He was that good feeling of waking up in a warm bed and not having to get up. He was Mike. And Other-El was lucky to have him.

Other-El.

This wasn’t my life.

I pulled back suddenly. Mike gasped for air, eyes full of lust and love. So much love. His hands were under my clothes, caressing my back. He wanted me. But I wasn’t his wife.

I was just a copy of her. A sad, unfit-to-be-a-wife-or-a-mother copy. I slid off his lap and looked away. I cleaned the dried tears on my cheekbones. Mike kept staring at me. He didn’t understand.

He didn’t understand that I couldn’t be his wife, or the mother of his daughter.

He couldn't be real.

Because I didn't know how to love.

Not since my dad passed away.

Not since Brenner hurt me.

Not since *I* knew that I was better off alone.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, before standing up and going to bed.

*If anyone is listening, ... I want to go back to my life now, please.*

## 9. The future

Of course, the universe didn't listen to me. I slept throughout the entire day, waking up only at one am, more tired than I was before going to bed. My pillow had wet spots on it. I had cried during my sleep.

Those hands. That smirk. Those evil eyes. They hurt this El too. They scarred her as well, haunted her in nightmares.

But she had Mike. She survived them. She let love in.

Mike wasn't in the bed with me. I frowned, stood up and walked to the living-room. He was sleeping on the sofa.

I sighed. There was a big panda on the floor. It was a new toy, certainly a gift from Will and Lucas.

I crouched next to Mike and touched his face carefully. He made a small noise and moved his face away, changing positions. His back was now facing me. I sat down on the floor, pulled the huge panda to my lap, and thought about what to do.

What was the point of being here, in this alternative reality? To find out that it wasn't that much different from my actual life?

At least, I had a family here. In my life, I had Samantha and Will. They were great. The best friends anyone could ask for. But they both had dreams, a future in mind, which it didn't involve taking care of single and crazy El, who didn't believe in love, or people.

I touched Mike's back. I shook him a bit. He finally woke up, sitting up, confused.

"El," he mumbled, rubbing his eye. "What's wrong?"

"Come to bed," I asked gently.

He looked at me, frowning. I stood up and gave him my hand to take. He took it and stood up. I left the big panda on the living-room's floor and walked Mike to our bedroom. We laid down, on our sides,

looking at each other.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“Are you?” I asked back.

He gave me a weak, sleepy smile. “Yes.”

“Then, I am as well,” I replied. I would be.

Because, as long as I was in this life, in this reality, I had Mike.

---

After work, Will took me out for a quick snack. He drove my car, taking us to this café which we used to go to when we were in college. In my head, three weeks ago, we had been there, writing stupid essays about art and film-making. To him, it had been a couple of years.

We ordered two hot chocolates and croissants. Will took out his coat, showing off this very nice, fancy shirt.

“I had lunch with Lucas’ parents,” he told me.

“Alone?”

Will chuckled. “Yeah, Lucas had to work.”

I made a shocked face. He laughed again.

“They are my in-laws. I’m not scared of them. Anyways, they are here for a few days. Lucas didn’t manage to take today’s off, but in the next two he will be around as well.”

It seemed so strange, Will having Lucas’ parents staying with them for a few days. In moments like these, it really felt like college had been years ago. I felt twenty-five, not twenty.

“So, are you okay?” Will finally asked.

I sighed. Of course, this was about me. Having a quick snack at our old typical café couldn't just be a way of spending time together. It had to be about me and this stupid, crazy situation I was in.

"I... just want to go back to my reality."

He blinked.

"Okay...You're still on that? I thought you and Mike talked about this being the fut-"

"You talk with Mike about me?" I interrupted him, suddenly mad. No, Will was my best friend. He wasn't Mike's. He couldn't take that away from me.

Suddenly, I was ten years old and was fighting this Mandy girl who had said she was best friends with Will after a stupid school trip. I had been so mad that day, and Will, poor, innocent Will, had been home, sick, without knowing what was happening at school. When Dad picked me up, after been called because his daughter had punched a girl in the face, he just laughed at me. *You act like Will won't be your best friend forever, El, honestly*, he said.

Will blinked again.

"Well, sometimes... I mean, it's all a mess, isn't it? And I'm the only one that knows besides you two, so of course he is going to talk to me, El."

He was right. Mike wasn't that stupid Mandy girl.

"Sorry, I'm... a bit of a mess," I said. He gave me a weak smile, like saying it was okay. Will always understood me. "But it isn't the future..."

"Why can't it be the future?"

I opened my mouth to say *just because*, when I realized that there was in fact a real reason why it couldn't be my future.

"It's too good to be true," I admitted.

The waitress brought us our hot chocolates and croissants. Will thanked for both, while I stared at the brown, thick liquid inside a white cup.

I couldn't keep saying to myself it was because I couldn't love someone else, or find it in me to be a wife or a mother. Not after seeing that Mike knew about what Brenner had done to me and *still* loved me.

"El," Will called, his hand finding mine on top of the table. "It can be true."

A single tear escaped from my eyes. I cleaned it before anyone could see I was crying.

"I spent the last days praying this was really an alternative reality because—" I sniffled quietly —"maybe in this place El, the other-El, didn't have to suffer what I have suffered. She didn't have to have her mind and body poisoned by the cruelty of some people."

Will was looking at me, worried, yet with a slight confused expression. He wasn't understanding the meaning of my words. We had lived through so much stuff together that, honestly, my speech could be about anything and anyone.

"Brenner," I added. He understood right away. The pain in his eyes, the same pain Mike had experienced yesterday when remembering my story, my past... It made me chuckle gloomily. Compassion was nice when you were the one giving it. "I wished I was in another reality so that I could know that there is a place that he didn't hurt me. I wished that *that* was the reason why I got sent here. So, that I could find some peace in me, knowing that some other-El was happier." I shook my head. "But what do I get? My mom fuckin' married the guy, that's what I get."

"El..."

"No, Will, no. You see, maybe... maybe this is why I'm here," I said the words, while the realization came to me. "Maybe I'm here to see one of my future possibilities. Maybe I'm here to change things, to do the right thing in my past."

He blinked.

“And what is the right thing?” He asked, concerned. “Telling your mom what happened before she marries the bastard?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“And can you do it?” His words were harsh. I looked at him, hurt. “El, there was a reason why your life went the way it went. Why your mother married that asshole and you stayed quiet about it.”

And deep down I knew why. Because my mother, my poor, sweet mother, who was too naïve, too innocent, had already suffered too much in her life and deserved some happiness. Brenner made her happy. Just the thought of it made me want to puke, but I couldn’t deny the truth. Martin fuckin’ Brenner was a despicable man, but he made my mother happy.

*“You’re going to do this to your mother?” Brenner asked me calmly. He had drink in his hands. We were in the kitchen, my mother was outside, in the sun, entertaining some guests. “She loves me, Eleven. Don’t you want your mother to be loved back?”*

“That’s why I don’t like love,” I confessed out loud. “Because I don’t want to wake up one day and find out the person I love is bad.”

That was why I never told my mom what Brenner had done to me. Because I didn’t want her goodness and happiness to be destroyed. Because, after years and years of taking her pain away, of letting myself be consumed by it, I still couldn’t bring myself to let *her* feel my agony. I still wanted her to be happy.

“So, are you going to change that?” He asked me. “When you get back... if you get back, El.”

“Why wouldn’t I get back?”

He didn’t have an answer for me.

“What would be the point of all this if I didn’t get to go back to my life?” I asked next. He still had no answer. Our hot chocolates were now cold. “Why would this be a celestial mistake, and not one on



purpose?”

He finally took a sip of his drink. I closed my eyes, rubbed my forehead, trying to push down this sudden headache. Crying made my head hurt. I wasn't used to cry much. Not since that night. Not after what Brenner did to me. After what happened, nothing seemed to be good enough for my tears. People were mean to me? Fine, be mean. The teachers didn't give me a good grade? Whatever, next time I'd do better. My friends were acting like assholes and we had a fight? Not point in crying if I knew that we would make up.

My mother marrying that asshole? Yeah, that made me want to cry. And a lot. But I couldn't do it here, in a public place. So, I held my tears back.

“I just want you to be okay, El,” Will finally talked.

I forced a weak smile. “I'm always going to be okay, Willster.”

---

I got home and found Mae sitting on the sofa, with an opened book on her lap.

“Mommy, looooooook, a cow!” She exclaimed, pointing to a picture of a cow in the book. I forced a smile. “Cow go moo.”

“Goes, sweetie. A cow goes moo,” I corrected. She repeated happily.

I heard a door opening and looked across the hallway. Mike was leaving the bathroom with a towel around his waist and his dark hair wet. He looked at me like he was surprised to see me. His cheekbones were red, probably from the heated air in the shower. He looked away after a few seconds and turned to our bedroom. To his surprise, I followed him. I needed to change my clothes as well.

“You don't mind?” He asked me, concerned.

“I won't look, I promise,” I replied in what was supposed to be a

teasing voice.

“Right,” he murmured, before turning to the wardrobe and grabbing some fresh clothes and underwear.

I went to my side of the bed and sat down. I took off my black, formal shoes, and then undid my jeans. I changed to a pair of man’s shorts and a huge *Ghostbusters* t-shirt. Both belonged to Mike.

I had never asked myself, what would be like coming home to someone that loved me, sharing clothes with that person, having a life together. How comfortable and easy it would be to just be with someone.

I remembered seeing my parents, happy, young and in love. I remembered seeing my mother with Martin. After years of sorrow, she was smiling again because of him. I remembered Will, every time he got a new boyfriend. Or Samantha. And how confident they were about their future with that person. And how wrong they turned out to be.

“Are you feeling better?” Mike asked.

I looked over my shoulder and saw he was already dressed in some dark blue shorts and a black, plain t-shirt. I smiled weakly.

“Why do you love me?”

He blinked, confused with the question.

“Knowing what you know about me...”

*“You’re a mess, Eleven, honestly,” Martin told me, keeping an eye out for my mother, who was talking to some neighbours in our garden. “Whatever you think happened, get over it. You were drunk.”*

*“I know what happened,” I said. He took one step closer to me and I moved away, scared. My heart beat fast. “You ra-“*

*His hand grabbed my face. He put it on top of my mouth and made a silence sign with his other hand. “Just because you are a mess, it doesn’t mean you have to drag your mother into it.”*

Mike shook his head and walked up to my side of the bed. He sat down next to me.

“Why would that make me not love you?”

I shrugged.

“I tried to push it down,” I said. “Always try... Pretend it didn’t happen. Most days I can do it. Being here, in...” Some part of me still wished this was an alternative reality. Why did I wish for that so bad? I sighed. “Being here, it triggered me, made me remember what happened that night... Because you’re here,” I added, looking at him. “And I just wonder... how-“

“I don’t know,” he interrupted me. “I don’t know why I fell in love with you in the first place. But believe me..., my feelings for you –“ He grabbed my hand gently –“they only grew bigger and deeper with time. They never changed to anything less than friendship, passion, and love.”

I touched his face, caressed his cheekbone. He had such a soft skin, pale, filled with little dots. Beautiful freckles.

He was sweet. Nice. Trustworthy. Home.

Mike was home.

I blinked as a terrible thought came to me. What if Mike was the thing I needed to change? What if having him in my life made me feel so safe that... that I didn’t get to tell my mom about Brenner?

*That’s stupid*, a voice said in my head.

Yes, but what if it was true?

Mike was home. He made me feel safe. He was there when my mom gave me the news. He was there with me at their wedding. He gave me a new family, allowing me to be strong enough to forget the fact that my own mother was married and happily living with a terrible man. A man that had hurt me.

What if I had never met him and fell in love with him? Would I have

had the guts to tell my mom, the only family I would have, not to marry that dreadful man?

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I hoped you enjoyed it! I know it's getting a bit angsty, but don't you worry!

## 10. The fight

“You and Mike are having problems, aren’t you?”

I looked up, shocked at those words. Max was staring at me, trying to read me.

“Why would you say that?”

“You aren’t as eager to go home as you usually are. You even stay late.”

“That’s because we have an event to organize,” I replied dryly.

“No, that’s not why.” She was challenging me. She wanted to get the truth out of me. But I couldn’t do it. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied and sent out one more e-mail to the design department. We needed the event’s posters and fliers to start its promotional campaign. Why were people so slow at their jobs? They were pissing me off.

Everything was pissing me off, actually. My mind, mostly. The thoughts about Mike, about my mother, about why I was here, living my own future.

Or this reality.

*Stop it, El.*

*But wouldn’t it be nice if...* Yes, yes, it would. And it would also be also so terrible. Because it meant that Mike didn’t exist.

It made sense if he didn’t, if this was really an alternative place and, actually, the universe was making fun of me. *Ah-ha, you thought someone could love you.*

I closed my eyes, trying to keep away the tears. I wasn’t going to cry again. Not after how much I had already cried in the past few days.

I felt arms around me. I opened my eyes. Max was hugging me.

“It’s okay, El,” she said in a calming voice. “You and Mike will get over whatever problems you’re facing. You two are, like, the whole reason why love exists.”

That just made me want to cry even more.

Dustin appeared in that moment. He gave us a concerned look and then asked if he should leave and come back later. I shook my head.

“No, come in. We need to talk about how awfully slow the design team is,” I said.

Dustin let out a groan. “They are the worst!”

And then, we spent a few minutes complaining about them. Actually, Max and Dustin did. They even made funny voices, pretending that one of them was the boss and the other was one of the designers talking really slow since everything about them was slow, according to Dustin.

I looked at the clock on the wall. In thirty minutes I had to go home. Mike knew I distanced myself from him, from Mae, from everything. I put my time and soul in working now. I was getting good at it, faster, more creative. I could really see myself doing it in the future.

In this future I was living.

I closed my eyes and once again saw myself pretending that this was indeed another reality. It made me temporarily feel better thinking like that. Before I was so sure I was living some other-El’s life because it didn’t make any sense for this to be my future. But now... now that it felt more like my future than anything else, pretending that it still could be another reality made my tears go away. Unless I thought about Mike. And that was why I put space between us. That was why I was more certain that, when I returned to my time and met him, I would have to make a choice: fall in love with him or stop my mom from marrying Brenner.

Max and Dustin were getting ready to leave. I had to do the same. I turned off my computer, rearrange some things on my desk and then grabbed my coat and purse. I took the lift with Max. Dustin stayed

behind in the hallway, waiting for something. Or someone.

I frowned. Did he usually wait for someone?

“Why did Dustin stay behind?” I asked.

Max snorted. “You ask like you don’t know.”

And I didn’t.

But she didn’t know that. And I thought she was going to say something about that, about how I was being weird and asking questions I shouldn’t ask. Yet, she just sighed and said, “He is waiting for his girlfriend.”

I blinked. Dustin has a girlfriend? But... What about Max?

“Oh, of course”, I mumbled.

“I know you know,” she suddenly said.

I glanced at her. The lift stopped. We got out at the parking floor. Our cars were parked side by side.

“Know what?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes.

“That I like him,” she replied, and then shrugged. “But I’m getting over it. I mean, it’s just a stupid crush. I’m twenty-five. I shouldn’t even have one.”

“There is no age for a crush,” I told her. I was quoting directly from Samantha, when I told her that she wasn’t a ten-year-old having a crush on a teacher. Her Mass Media professor was really hot, though.

Max snorted.

“And you say that because you and Mike have been together for almost five years and still act like two kids having a crush on each other?” She replied. I looked down. “Oh, I’m sorry... I... It’s weird to know you two are...fighting. It has never happened... I think.”

We weren't fighting. It was more complicated than that. But how on earth could I explain it to her? Not even Will understood me. I tried, I really tried to explain to him that it made me felt better – although most time I felt like shit - to push Mike away. It made it hurt less (of course, it depended on the times. I really was such a mess). Will thought that my all theory of being in the future to change something about it was ridiculous. And was even more ridiculous because I believed that what I had to change was Mike.

"Well, you two need to make it up before going to Hawkins, sweet El," Max said.

I blinked. We were going to Hawkins?

Max gave me this weird look. "Aren't you going anymore?"

I had no idea.

"Yeah, we are," I said uncertain.

Why were we going there?

"I think it's sweet," she continued, making her way to her car. "That you guys are going to Will's mother birthday."

Joyce Byers. Now, there was a good reason to go back to Hawkins.

"Yeah, I know," I said back. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Max."

"Bye, El!"

I got into my car, placed my purse on the seat next to mine and thought about calling Will for a second. Then, I thought how weird it would look to Max if I just stayed in my car, calling someone, instead of driving away. So, I turned the keys and started the car. I drove off before she did. I made my way to the park near my old flat. I wasn't going to visit Dad today. I was just going to catch some air. And call Will.

I found an empty, full of graffities bench and sat down. I took my cell phone out of my coat's pocket and picked Will's number. He answered after a few rings.



“Hey, El, what’s up?”

“We are going to Hawkins?”

He went quiet for a moment.

“Yeah. Mike didn’t tell you?”

“What do you think?” I replied sarcastically.

I heard him sigh.

“We have it planned since Christmas. We’re going to surprise my mom on her birthday. Everyone’s going. You three, Lucas and me, my brother...”

Joyce Byers had been like a mother to me, when my mother couldn’t be it. She had been one of my dad’s closest friends since childhood, living almost next to each other for twenty years before she got married to this guy. Dad also married my mom around that time and picked a new place with her, a few streets away from his old house. They kept in touch. And they were really happy when Will and I became friends. Joyce was an amazing woman and mother. I always looked up to her.

“It’s just for a couple days...” He added.

But going back to Hawkins was awful for me. Even when I wasn’t in this messed-up situation, I rarely went back home. I only went on Christmas and it was the most dreadful holiday of my life. Seeing Brenner and my mother playing a happy couple, enjoying the season like it was so goddamn special to them, it hurt me, made me want to puke or scream non-stop. It made me want to disappear.

And being in there, in my hometown, where my dad used to take me for walks, taught me things and was now laying under the ground, it made me feel like I was going to suffocate. Even worse, it made me remember what had happened. Every time I left, it was like I could pretend that it never happened and everything was okay. Of course, it was never okay. I had my days, the ones in which those hands, that smirk and those evil eyes haunted my dreams and followed me throughout my classes. But not seeing them it made me better.

And, if this was really my future (one part of me was really trying not to believe in it just to push the pain away), then having Mike, falling in love with him, it made me better. But it led my mother into a marriage with Brenner. And that... that I had to stop.

Didn't I?

---

I grabbed dinner at a random place, ignored Mike's and Will's phone calls, and pretended that nothing was wrong. If I didn't see them, if I didn't talk to them, then everything could be normal.

*That's a very bad way of coping, Jane*, my psychologist told me in one of our sessions, five months after my dad passed away and I refused to talk to anyone. I barely spoke for the year after my dad died. Just some words here and there. Will was the one that could get most out of me, but even with him I closed myself. *You have to talk to people, see them, even when things aren't okay. You have to learn how to let the others in. Find out that there are people trustworthy. People that love you.* That was how she used to end sessions, with the same stupid advice. It took my almost two years to accept her words and start talking more. One year later, my mother brought Martin fuckin' Brenner to have dinner with us.

I finally paid for my meal, put on my coat and grabbed my purse. I walked to my car, parked nearby. I was near the university campus. I remembered some places like it was yesterday and the stupid shit I did there. Like that one time I had a bet with Samantha that I could climb the tallest tree in the campus. I almost broke my arm. But I was okay. And I won the bet. She had to pay for my drinks for one month, and what a month it had been.

Will was right. We did drink too much in college.

I finally got to my building's garage. I parked the car in its usual spot and took the lift to the third floor.

I was getting the keys out of my purse when the door opened and Mike was facing me with this emotionless expression. I looked down, ashamed, and walked in. I was going straight to the bedroom when I noticed Mae wasn't in the living-room and her bedroom was empty as well. I looked at Mike.

"We need to talk," he said. "And it is better if Mae isn't here."

I closed my eyes. Great. Of course, Mike couldn't be the most understanding person in the world forever. He was human. He knew I was pushing him away. I took a deep breath.

I put down my purse on the couch and took out my coat. He left the closed door and walked up to the kitchen table, sitting down one of the chairs. He wanted me to do the same.

I made time, taking off my shoes and putting them in a small corner. He was waiting quietly, being as patient as he always was, but, when he saw me grabbing my purse and coat, and almost making my way to bedroom, he spoke loudly, "Stop it, El. For fuck's sake!"

I turned to him, with my eyes wide-opened.

"Talk to me!" He demanded and stood up. "What the hell has happened? You keep pushing me away. We were okay. We were handling this fucking situation and then... What the fuck, El?"

I had tears in my eyes. Of course, I wanted to cry. I felt so weak.

I put down my coat and purse again, tried to buy me more time again. But Mike wasn't having it.

"Please, Eleven, just talk to me," he said.

"I didn't know we were going to Hawkins," I replied instead.

He rolled his eyes. "Don't change the subject, El."

"I'm not," I lied. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you fucking pushed me away, that's why!" He almost screamed.

I closed my eyes, whimpering.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. I opened my eyes. He was making a face, trying to hide how miserable he actually was. I was his wife. His reality turned upside down overnight.

How could I tell him? How could I look into his eyes and tell him out loud that I was sure I was in the future to change something and that something was he?

It was better to push him away. It was better to make him suffer, make him hate me, so he didn’t have to know that the woman he loved was going to change the fact that she loved him and they were happy so that her mother didn’t marry a monster.

It was better to push him away.

“Please, El,” Mike begged, taking one step closer to me. “Please, tell me what is wrong. Let me in. Let me help you with whatever you need.”

A tear escaped from my eyes. And then another. And another.

I didn’t get it, how he loved me so much. How he could stand here, after days and days of me ignoring him, and still wanted to make things work, still wanted to be here for me.

“You’re too good to be true,” I confessed with tears falling down my face. “You-“ I sobbed –“you feel like a dream.” Like another reality.

Mike frowned, confused, and then shook his head, taking another step closer to me.

“Why do you keep believing in that?” He asked. “Why do you keep denying that this is the actual word, your actual life? I’m too good? I’m a dream?” He repeated my words back to me, shaking his head. “I’m as human as you are, El. I fuck up as much as you do. You know that.”

But I didn’t know that. Not this El.

I sobbed again. He took more steps into my direction and grabbed

gently my hands. He stared at me with such pain in his eyes. I sobbed once more.

“Stop making me not real,” he asked. “I’m real. Let me real, El.”

“And you are,” I replied. A small smile appeared on his face, like he felt he was getting somewhere, finally. So, of course, I had to destroy him. Because that was what I did better. “And this is my future, Mike, I know that too... And I know why I am here.”

Mike blinked, surprised. He touched my face, cleaning my tears. “Why are you here?” He asked softly.

“To change something,” I replied with a shaking voice. I grabbed the hand that was caressing my cheek and pushed it away. I pushed him away. He frowned, confused and hurt. “I have to stop my mother from marrying Brenner.”

Mike looked even more confused. He looked away for a few seconds, and then replied, “Okay... How are you going to do that?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I couldn’t say it. I couldn’t hurt him like that.

“El,” he called, scared.

I shook my head again, stepping back. I tried taking deep breaths, but the sobs were stuck in my throat, the tears were falling again, and my heart was beating fast. I was shaking.

“What are you going to change?” Mike asked.

I opened my eyes. I stared at him, every little detail of him. He was tall, slim. His black hair had a life of its own, one day was straight, the other was a bit curly. Today it was mix of both. His freckles, his pale skin, his eyes. I could stare at him all day.

*I could stare at him for the rest of my life.*

I sobbed.

“You,” I finally said. “I have to change you.”

Mike stared at me. He didn't even know how to react to my answer. There was a confused expression in his eyes, like he didn't understand my words, despite them being so simple. And then, a sudden anger appeared and he almost turned around, like he was going to leave.

He finally took a few steps away from me as if my presence hurt him. And it did.

"What... the... fuck, El?" He asked, not looking at me. "You have to change me? Me?"

I sobbed.

"She is the only family I have, Mike", I told him. "If I don't have you, then... she's the only one."

He glared at me, mad and hurt.

"I need her not to marry him... I need her to-"

"And you think I'm the thing that is going to change that?" He interrupted me. "After everything we've been through-" He shut himself up, shaking his head. Tears finally fell down. He closed his eyes and turned away from me. "Of course, you don't know..." He shook his head one more time.

"Mike, I'm sorry," I said, sobbing. "I... I need my mother."

Because she was still my mother, even if our relationship wasn't perfect, even if we hated each other more times than we loved each other. She was still my mother and I couldn't let her marry that monster. I couldn't let *me* put her feelings first. Not this time.

"That's ridiculous, El," he said. He still didn't look at me. "That's the most stupid thing I've ever heard you say, and trust me, I've heard you say a lot of shit in these past five years."

I accepted his words, nodding through small whimpers. This was it. This was the moment Mike was going to start hate me.

*Good, it will hurt him less.*

But it would hurt like hell to me.

It was already hurting. Every heartbeat was like a knife being stabbed into my chest. Every breath was like I was drowning and couldn't come up for air. Every time Mike's face made a painful expression and his tears fell, it was awful. I just wanted to find a whole and hide there.

But I had to do it. I had to face this pain in order to save my mother from a marriage with a terrible man.

"I can't let her be married to him," I said out loud. "I can't-" I took a deep breath through a sob -"I can't let her love a bad man. I just can't."

Mike finally looked at me. He had no anger in his eyes, just pain. I wanted to hug him, take his pain away. But I was the one causing it. What would be the use?

"I need some air," he murmured.

Grabbing his wallet and his keys from this small piece of furniture near the door, he left.

I was alone in a flat that wasn't mine, yet it had become to be. Mae's toys were on the floor, her pink blanket laying on the couch, Mike's drawings on the table, still scattered around. I walked up to the table and picked one up. He had been sketching a fight scene between a hero and a villain. There were no written lines yet, just a few outlines of the characters' bodies facing each other. It was good, even if it was only a draft.

I walked to the living-room and decided to pick up Mae's toys. I didn't even know where she was. Probably with Will and Lucas. Maybe I should call them.

I put Mae's toys in their basket near one of the sofa's edges and then grabbed my phone from my purse. I called Will. I confirmed Mae was with him.

"Is everything okay?" He asked.

“Nothing’s has been okay for a long time, Will,” I replied. “But it will be.”

“El-“

I hung up. I threw the phone to the sofa and, as I was about to leave the living-room and go take a shower, I came back. If Mike called, if he decided to talk to me, it would be awful if I didn’t pick up. So, I took the phone with me to the bathroom.

I took a long shower, washing my hair three times just to pass the time. I rubbed my cheeks, cleaning away the dried tears, and then my eyes, forbidding myself from crying more. I knew what I had to do. I couldn’t regret my decision. Not even if Mike... No, I wouldn’t think about him. It would just hurt me and confuse me. I had to do the right thing. I couldn’t live a life in which my mother was married to that asshole.

How did I even manage to go to her wedding? How did I go through watching them get married, kissing in front of a crowd, and proclaiming their love? After what he had done to me...

I got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my body. I cleaned the foggy mirror and looked at myself. My eyes were red, with dark circles under them, telling me that I was a mess. I was tired. I wanted to go home. But I wanted Mike as well.

And I got the answers to my questions: it was because of Mike. Mike had been there for me, when I got the news, when I had to go to the wedding and see them be happy. He gave me a safe place, a home, comfort. He gave me love and, in return, I had let my mother go.

This was why *I* was here. The El that had yet met Mike and fallen in love with him. The El that still had her mother as her family. I could do it. Go back and not fall in love with him. I could choose my mother because I still love my mother more than I loved Mike.

I just hoped Mike would understand.

*You know he won’t*, a small voice told me. Because he could be the one of the best people I had ever met, but he was still human. And I



had told him he was going to lose the woman he loved. He was going to lose his daughter.

I closed my eyes and shook my head, preventing the tears from falling.

Little Mae was never going to exist.

*Can you really do that?*

I grabbed my phone and called Will. I told him I wanted Mae to spend the night here. I wanted to spend the night with her, even if Mike didn't return. Will agreed and told me they would be here in twenty.

I cleaned myself and put on my pyjamas, a pair of shorts and a t-shirt from Mike, as usual. I waited sitting on the table, in front of Mike's sketches. I should eat something, drink some tea, something. But I couldn't move. I just waited for the doorbell to ring.

I looked at the clock and it felt like it wasn't moving. The seconds were slower. The minutes weren't passing. Mike wasn't home. Where did he go? Would he come back to sleep here? If not, where would he sleep?

God, was it supposed to hurt this much? I barely knew Mike. Future me knew him better, loved him more, but not this me. Why was it hurting so much?

I looked at his drawings once again. I picked up a few of them. I tried to read the drafts, understand what was happening in each scene. Mike was good at what he did. I was good at what I did.

I put down the drawings, organizing them in a small pile and putting them inside this black portfolio. Then, I sat still, staring at the wooden table. I remembered the stories Mike told me about us. We met at a college party. He paid a stupid, drunk me a meal. He took me home. I called him the next day and offered him a stupid study session.

I grabbed my own head and laid it down on the table as a realization came to me. Of course, Mike was going to hate me. I made the decision. I initiated the whole thing that would lead us to this place,

married and with a kid. And now, because of some stupid celestial joke, I was going to change it all. Because I knew my future and twenty-year-old me couldn't allow it to be like this. Not even if it seemed so perfect.

*It isn't perfect. Your mother is married to Brenner.*

Finally, the doorbell rang. I stood up quickly and opened the door. Will was holding Mae in his arms. He was alone. I frowned.

"Where's Lucas?" I asked, taking Mae into my arms. She hugged me, sleepy, laying her small head on my shoulder.

"Home," he said.

I blinked.

"I thought he was coming," I replied.

Will shrugged. "He was busy."

And I knew Mike was with them. I closed my eyes and nodded. At least, I knew where he was.

"Thank you, Will," I said sincerely. "I'm going to take care of Mae."

And, suddenly, I realized that Mike knew I had asked Will to bring Mae home. And he had allowed it, despite what I had told him. I felt like crying again.

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Will asked.

I shook my head.

"I just want to be with Mae," I said in a small voice.

He nodded. "Okay... Well, if you need anything, just call me."

"I will," I agreed.

We said our goodbyes and I closed the door. I took a sleeping Mae to the bedroom with me. I placed her carefully on Mike's side of the bed, took her shoes off and then laid down next to her. I made sure

she was well covered and wasn't cold.

I stared at her, with no trace of sleep in me. I was tired because I had cried too much. I was exhausted because I spent days after days in the office, letting myself be consumed by the film festival in order to avoid Mike and my feelings. I felt like I had the weight of the world inside my chest, but, here, gazing at an adorable, sleeping Mae, it was like I could breathe better.

She was beautiful. Her dark, curly locks were spread on the pillow. I took one small piece from her face and caressed her smooth, baby skin. She had freckles, just like Mike, covering a tiny version of my nose. She was so innocent, so happy, so loveable.

"I'm sorry, Mae," I whispered to her sleeping figure. She didn't even move.

Around two am, I fell asleep with dried tears on my cheeks.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Better times will come! Please tell me what you think!

## 11. The last moments

### Notes for the Chapter:

Two things before reading the chapter:

1. I want to apologize for not having answered your comments! I do appreciate and love each one of them, but school has started and everything has been a total mess! So, thank you so much for enjoying this story! It means a lot to me!

2. Warning: This chapter is kind of Rated M.

Mae woke up me the following morning around eleven am by patting my face and calling me over and over. I opened my eyes to see her sleepy smile and pink cheeks. She was hungry and wanted pancakes. I frowned. I didn't know how to make pancakes.

I stood up and took her with me to the bathroom. The house was so quiet, without Mike in the morning making breakfast, listening to the radio or the news. Mae sat still on the toilet while I brushed my teeth and washed my face. Then, I grabbed her, helped her clean her face and her teeth and took us to the kitchen.

"How about French toasts?" I asked her, sitting her on her chair. She made a face. "Come on, sweetie, I don't know how-"

The door opened. I turned around and saw Mike. A very tired and miserable Mike. He was holding a paper bag on his hands.

"Daddy!!" Mae said happily.

Mike gave a weak smile to Mae.

"I brought breakfast," he said and walked up to the table. He ignored me, put the bag down and hugged Mae, taking her into his arms. "You want waffles?"

"Yes!" She shouted excited.

He sat her down on her chair again and opened the bag. I stood there, watching him interact with Mae while ignoring my presence. I

deserved that. I knew it. But it didn't mean it didn't hurt.

I took a few steps back and went to the fridge to grab something for me to eat, despite not being hungry and having a terrible headache. I needed an aspirin, I suddenly remembered. My usual hangover was killing me. I slept so bad last night. I had the weirdest dreams, where Brenner would turn into Mike, and Mike would turn into my mother and my mother would suddenly be my dad. And then I would wake up and see little Mae sleeping quietly and peacefully. She calmed me down until I fell asleep again and those dreams came back.

I closed the fridge and left the room. There was a small shelf on the bathroom's wall with a variety of things. There was also a box of aspirins on it, which was already half empty since I took one almost every day. Putting an aspirin in my mouth, I leaned over the sink and drank straight from the tap.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I was a mess. I didn't even brush my hair. I felt even more tired than I was the previous night.

When would I go back to my present life? What else could the universe want from me? I had made my decision. I had hurt Mike and possibly made him hate me.

"El."

I jumped, surprised. Mike was standing on the other side of the opened door.

"Can we talk?" He asked, looking down at his own feet.

I nodded, scared. We left the bathroom and went to the bedroom, leaving the door open so we could hear Mae. I took a quick glance and noticed she was sitting on the sofa eating a waffle and watching TV.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, playing with his hands, while trying to find the words to say to me. I didn't know if I was ready for whatever it was coming. Could I live with the fact that I made a good, loyal and amazing man hate me?

*Breath, El, control yourself.*

Mike didn't look at me. He stared at his hands, at his feet, at everything around the room, but not to me. He didn't dare to look at me.

Did he hate me that much already?

"I accept it," he finally spoke.

I blinked, confused.

He wetted his lips slowly, with his gaze stuck on something on the floor.

"Accept it?" I asked hesitantly.

He nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I accept the fact that you're going to change me, El."

And I felt like crying.

"What?"

He looked at me.

"If that's what you want, if that's what you believe will make you feel better, then I accept it, El. I take these years I had with you and... dream about them in another life." He had tears in his eyes.

I couldn't believe him. He was accepting this?

Fuck, he was perfect.

*Fuck, El, take it back.*

"You really love me, don't you?" I asked, holding back a sob.

He shrugged.

"Yeah, I suppose I do."

I shook my head.

“Why? Why are you accepting it?”

Mike finally looked at me.

“It doesn’t matter why, does it? It matters that I accept it and, El-“ He stood up and walked up to me. He took my hands into his –“If you’re really going to do this, if you’re really going back and change me, and make everything we lived together disappear... then, ... at least... At least, let me have this. Let me have you until you really have to go back. Please.”

I stared at him, surprised. His thumbs were caressing the backs of my hands in small circles. He was begging me through his eyes to let him do this. To let him love me like he loved his wife one last time. To let us be a happy family.

I nodded, with tears falling down my face.

“Of course.” I said and kept nodding my head. I let go of his hands and touched his face instead, caressed his freckles, pulled him down to me. “Of course.”

I kissed him softly.

I was going to let him love me. And I was going to try my best and make him happy. I owed him that.

---

It was supposed to be weird. But it wasn’t. That night, after putting Mae to sleep with Mike, after finally joining him in Mae’s room, to his delight, and wished our daughter a good night with a kiss on her forehead, we went to our bedroom and, as I laid down on my back, he laid on his side and put an arm around me, pulling me closer. I smiled at him, comfortable.

He gave me a small smile back. I laid a hand on his face and he closed his eyes, taking a deep breath.

“I missed this,” he confessed. “Hugging you close.”

I kissed his nose.

"Tell me about us," I asked him.

He opened his eyes.

"Like what?"

I shrugged.

"Something that will make us smile."

He thought for a few seconds, while pulling me even closer. I moved to lay on my side, facing him, and, with a spontaneous feeling, threw a leg over his. He smiled at me.

"Well, there's our wedding," he said.

"Yes!" I smiled. That was a story I hadn't heard yet. "Are there photos?"

He laughed.

"No. It was a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing."

I looked at him, confused. His hand travelled from my hip to my stomach. He laid it there, open against the t-shirt I was wearing.

"You were five months pregnant," he started and his fingers moved a bit. They felt warm through the t-shirt. "We were having a film marathon. Old films. Horror ones, mostly. We were eating a lot of sweets. It was raining outside." His eyes went to the closed window of our bedroom. "And it was, what?, three in the morning? Yeah, something like that... You turned to me after the third film and... just asked me to marry you." I blinked, surprised. He blushed, looking away. "Yeah, you beat me to it. I was going to do it, you know, I had a ring in mind and all... But you decided you wanted to get married that night. So..."

"And we did?" I asked, shocked. "How?"

He chuckled. "I had a friend in college who had a license at the time.



He had got it online for his sister's wedding...She had wanted him to marry her... Anyways, it was still valid, so... we took the chance. We called him, he though we were mad, but... everyone always thought we were a bit crazy, you know?" I smiled. I didn't know, but I could imagine it perfectly. "So, because it was raining... he got sick and we had to pay him back in medication." Mike smirked as I giggled. "But we were happy to do it. It was one of the best nights of our lives... We had burgers next... And we came back home... It was great." He closed his eyes and sighed. "It was so fucking great, El."

Mike looked suddenly gloomy, recalling his memories, the happy moments we had shared together. Our love story.

It was hard to believe at first, that I had a love story with someone. I met a guy at a party, he took care of me, paid me French fries and a hot dog and then took me home. I called him the following day. I made the move to let him in my life, to allow him to be my friend, and then to become more. I told him I loved him first. I asked him to be there for me in what surely was one of the worst days of my life; one of the days that I would despise to share it with someone else because I hated when people saw my pain. And, finally, if I hadn't done enough, I was the one that proposed to him.

I allowed myself to love Mike because I knew he was a good person. I knew his love for me was real.

I wished I could actually live that.

I wished I hadn't had to choose between him and my mother.

"It's beautiful," I said. He looked at me, confused. "Our story," I added.

He smiled sadly. "Yeah, it is."

He was doing so much for me and I was going to give him up.

*You really don't deserve him.*

Did I ever deserve Mike? Had I been enough for him these past five years? Was I worth his sadness, his sacrifice? Or had I always asked too much of him and gave too little?

“Don’t overthink,” he asked me softly. I looked back at him. “Let’s enjoy this... While we can. Please.”

*Let’s take these last moments and do something memorable with them.*

I kissed him, gently at first, and then, as my hand grabbed his dark hair and pulled him closer, it grew more passionately. Mike was there next to me, giving back as much passion as I gave him. His tongue met mine, his hands knew exactly where to be, where to touch. His soft moans made me moan. I wanted more.

I pushed myself onto him, laying him on his back. His hands found the end of my t-shirt and slid against my skin, making me shiver. It felt so good. I moaned.

I didn’t remember the last time I had been with someone. It had been a while. I didn’t let enough people in. I didn’t trust guys after Brenner. There had been one or two after what had happened to me. Because, after months and months of going crazy, of still feeling his disgusting breath and hands on my skin, I thought: Maybe if someone else did it, if I took a chance on someone to touch me, maybe those images, those memories would go away. They didn’t. I just felt dirtier.

I pulled back suddenly. Mike was panting. His pupils were dilated and the way he looked at me... I wasn’t just a body, or someone to play with. Not to Mike.

I took off my t-shirt. I had no bra. Mike kept staring at me, his hands placed on my waist, his fingers carefully moving, stroking me. He waited for me to do something. He gave me the power to decide. So, I laid down on top of him and kissed him twice on the lips gently. We shared a quick smile, and then, my lips moved down to his neck. I tugged his t-shirt, asking him to take it off. I wanted to feel his skin against mine.

“El,” he moaned. “El, are you sure?”

I looked up at him, resting my chin on his chest. He looked back, worried. I smiled.

“I wanna know what is like to be your wife, Mike.”

Mike’s tender fingers touched my face, and then made their way into my hair. Gently, he pulled me, searching for my lips. I kissed him.

I could feel him through the shorts. And it made me feel incredible knowing he was reacting like this to me. For the first time, it didn’t disgust me, having a body so close to me, having someone touching me this way.

I tugged his t-shirt one more time and he finally pulled it off, throwing it to the floor, next to mine. Then, he turned us around, laying me on the bed. He stared at me, one of his hands playing with my hair, the other one tracing cautiously my face, my lips, then moving down to my neck and, finally, to my breasts. I bit my lip and closed my eyes, moaning, as he teased one of my nipples.

His lips met mine one more time, his tongue battled mine. I gripped his hair, pulled him closer, and wrapped my legs around him. I wanted every part of him touching mine.

I wanted every part of Mike Wheeler.

“*Your shorts*,” I whispered against his lips.

He nodded. I felt him moving as he took off his shorts and underwear. I looked down and then smirked at him. He blushed.

“You’re so terrible, El,” he mumbled. “It feels like our first time.”

“It does?” I said, a bit surprised.

He nodded gently. “You gave me that exact smirk when I took off my underwear.”

I smirked again and he chuckled. “You’re really terrible, El.” He kissed me again. His lips were moving gently against mine, tasting them carefully as if they were two strangers getting to know each other.

His fingers made their way from my hip to my shorts’ waistband. He tugged it, one of his fingers slipping inside and then out again as if he

were asking me for permission.

With a smile, I nodded. He took them off carefully and threw them behind his back. I frowned and looked down at the underwear he left on me.

“Mike.”

“What?” He tried to give me an innocent expression.

I rolled my eyes at him, kissed his nose and I reached down for my panties, wriggling my way out of them. He chuckled softly as I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down to another kiss.

I stroked the skin on the nape of his neck, felt his softness, as his lips left a trail of quick and gentle kisses on me, moving from my lips, to my chin, to my collarbone, where he left three of them in a row. The sheet around us started slipping from our bodies, and I looked down, seeing Mike’s head moving lower and lower on my stomach.

I closed my eyes in bliss, feeling Mike’s lips against my skin. I trusted him. God, I trusted him enough to let him do whatever he wanted with me.

I let out a sudden gasp as I felt his hands moving my legs away and he kissed me exactly where I needed the most. His lips moved delicately against me. I moaned his name loud when I felt his tongue playing with my clit. He looked up and I saw how shiny and wet his lips were. He smirked.

“Mouth-breather,” I said.

I heard him chuckle before his head lowered again.

Mike knew me. This wasn’t a new realization. I had understood that by now. But, as he played with one of my most sensitive body parties, as he made me cum from only his tongue, I finally realized that he knew *every single part of me*.

I was trying to catch my breath when I felt his body move up, his mouth finding mine one more time, like they couldn’t get enough of

mine. His lips had a different taste now. They were wetter. I smiled. He pulled back.

“What is it?”

“Can’t I smile?” I asked back.

His answer was to kiss my neck. I giggled and then, instead of a small, sweet kiss, he bit my skin. I held back a moan and slapped his arm playfully.

“You mou-“ He interrupted me with another kiss. “Do... you...-“ I pulled back –“condom?”

He rose an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

“If I weren’t, we wouldn’t be naked right now, Mike,” I replied.

He processed my words and nodded. Pulling away from me and moving to the other side of the bed, he opened the second drawer of his bedside table and searched around for a bit until he finally took out a condom, triumphant. I laughed at him and his stupid smile as he moved back to me. My arms found their way to his neck and I played with his hair as he ripped out the condom’s foil and then put it on.

Mike was gentle and loving. He looked at me and I nodded, giving him permission to carry on. As he slid inside of me, I closed my eyes and bit my lip. His movements were slow and thoughtful. His groans matched my moans and our lips would find each other over and over again. I didn’t remember sex being like this. I didn’t remember that being so close to someone could feel this good. I didn’t remember people could be tender and sex could be about love, and not power or pain.

This was why Mike was in my future.

I felt his hand finding mine and our fingers intertwining in a strong grip. His eyes never left mine, his lips never stopped kissing me, his moans made moan.

“M-Mike,” I whimpered in pleasure. He kissed me softly. I felt his

heavy breath against my face, matching mine. "More," I begged.

"El," he moaned, closing his eyes for a second. Then, he opened them and stared at me intensely. "El,... I love you," he murmured.

I didn't say it back. I pulled him down to a kiss, I moved my hips more frenetically, as my hands trailed down his back, my fingernails scraping his skin.

I couldn't say those words back. But it didn't mean that I didn't feel the same. Maybe, just maybe, I could feel for Mike what he felt for me.

---

The weeks went by. I woke up every morning next to Mike, still in the future, still living a life that could possibly become mine. Some days, it was hard and frustrating to wake up and still be here. Because I wanted to get this over with. I wanted my mother to stop being married to Brenner. I wanted her to kick that man out of our lives. There were moments in which I would like at the phone and think, *Call her. Tell her. Stop it now.* And then I would do nothing and move away from the phone.

On the other hand, yes, I had to admit, waking up with Mike's kisses on my neck, his hands caressing me, it was hard to want to let this go. It made me actually happy to wake up and still be here.

"Morning," Mike whispered against my ear.

I smiled sleepy, feeling his hand under my t-shirt, petting my stomach. I felt how close his fingers were near shorts' waistband. Without even opening my eyes, I grabbed his hand and moved it under the shorts and my underwear. I heard him gasp softly.

Mornings were like this now. My headaches, the ones provoked by the inexistent hangover, were still there, every day as I woke up, yet I almost didn't feel them. Not when Mike was testing how silent my moans could be.

"Can't have a noise complaint," he had told me in one of the mornings. I had woken up, we had kissed and then he moved down

under the sheets. Then, I had returned the favour, determined to make him as frustrated as he made me when he took things too slow. In the end, he had kissed me and said, “you’re the mouth-breather, honestly.”

Waking up with Mike by my side every morning was a bliss and, yes, there were mornings that I would think, *fuck, I don’t want this to end.*

But I knew those were just thoughts caused by my pleasure. I couldn’t allow myself to give in to this. I had to protect my mother.

After making me cum, after kissing me for a while, Mike finally stood up and walked to the bathroom. I laid still, on my back, staring at the ceiling. I was catching my breath. My cheekbones were probably red. My pupils still dilated.

When this all messed-up situation was still new and even more messed-up than now, Will told me there were a million reasons why I had married Mike. Never would I thought that being so goddamn good at giving orgasms was one of them.

He came back and smirked at me. I rolled my eyes and stood up.

“Wake Mae up,” I told him before leaving the bedroom to go to the bathroom.

I peed first and then washed my teeth and face. As I looked in the mirror, I saw a really small, dark bruise on my collarbone. I smiled and touched it. It was just a hickey. It shouldn’t make me feel this happy.

I left the bathroom and went to change to my stay-at-home clothes. Basically, I took some clothes from Mike.

The film festival was going to begin in a week. The next days were going to be a chaotic mess and I was probably not going to have a nice, peaceful day for a while. I had to enjoy this Sunday.

Mike was dressing Mae up when I got to her bedroom. I smiled at them. She held up her arms for me to take her. I did as she wished and gave her a big kiss on the cheek.

"Morning, sweetie," I said as Mike grabbed her little feet and put on a pair of small, warm shoes.

"Mommy, mommy," she almost sang and touched her hair. "Pony?"

I chuckled. "You want ponytails?"

She nodded happily.

So, I brushed her hair and did her hair in ponytails as Mike prepared breakfast for us. Although I had a free and lazy Sunday ahead of me, Mike was going to get a bit busy with his comic book. He had a meeting on Tuesday to show what he had done so far and he wanted to be well prepared and have a good part of the book already drawn.

Will and Lucas were coming for lunch. They said not to worry about the food since they would bring it. Mike was pretty sure it was going to be homemade hamburgers. I betted on a homemade pizza. Mae chanted that she wanted chocolate cake.

I spent the morning laying on the couch with Mae, watching cartoons. Mike was sitting on the kitchen table, surrounded by drawings. Sometimes I would hear him huff and curse quietly. It made me almost giggle and once in a while I would like behind the sofa to check on him and he would look back at me. We would share a smile.

Mae always told me to look at something important on TV. *Look at that, mommy. Look here, mommy. See that, mommy?*

"Yes, yes, I did, sweetie," I replied almost every time and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Around noon, the doorbell rang. Will and Lucas brought us all this variety of groceries to cook here, which did not involve whether hamburgers or pizza. They also brought chocolate cake for dessert. So, Mae was the winner in her guess. And she was very happy about it.

Lucas was the designated chef of the day. He was going to cook pork meat with potatoes cut in small pieces. He had all these ingredients to make this delicious sauce that only he, his mother and his



grandmother had the recipe for. Lucas was the eldest of three boys and, according to Will, the most spoiled one. He was grandma's favourite and, "Almost every day they talk on the phone. It's so *sweeeet*," he teased Lucas, who was cutting potatoes.

Lucas gave him a dirty look over the shoulder. Will chuckled, accepting a glass of orange juice from Mike. He gave me one as well. It turned out that spending years in college drinking made us want to drink less in our adulthood years. And, of course, having Mae around also gave us a boost to stop drinking since, one, we didn't want her to accidentally take a sip of wine or beer and, two, it made her feel more included since all of us were drinking orange juice. Mike had once told me she loved to copy us as her way of learning about life. So, we try to keep things easy and simple. I also learnt that Lucas had stopped smoking after she was around one year old because she wanted to do as he did and always tried to take his cigarette from his mouth.

I joined Lucas in the small area of the kitchen while Mike and Will sat down on the living room's floor to play with Mae. They were trying to help her complete this puzzle of farm animals.

Hesitantly, I approached Lucas, who was now cutting onions into small little pieces. "Do you need help?"

He looked at me and gave me a small smile. "Nah, I'm cool. I'm preparing the sauce now."

I nodded and pressed my lips together. Lucas didn't trust me and was aware that something was very, very wrong. Moreover, I had hurt Mike and he and Will had been his shoulder to cry on. For some reason, I wanted him to trust me and like me at least a bit before I went back to my twenty-year-old present.

"How about some company? Can I do that?" I asked hesitant.

He chuckled softly and nodded. "Sure," he replied, giving me a quick amused look. Holding the chopping board, he poured the small pieces of onion inside a pot. It had already olive oil and some other things I didn't recognize in it. Then, he poured water in.

Lucas stirred the sauce for a bit and then tasted it. He made a face and grabbed the salt shaker.

“Is it good?” I asked, trying to make conversation.

He looked at me, confused.

“The sauce,” I completed.

His confused look didn’t go away. Actually, it deepened. He raised an eyebrow and then chuckled, shaking his head.

“You know, I’m not stupid,” he started. Unconsciously, I took a step back. I had messed up. Again. Great. “Will doesn’t tell me what’s wrong. Mike just says that you two had a stupid fight, but... I know it’s more than that. And I don’t trust you right now, Eleven. I know you and this isn’t you.”

I gulped and took a glance at Mike and Will who were cheering on Mae.

“Don’t make me the bad guy,” he added. I looked back at him. He shrugged, putting a lid on the pot and letting it boil. “I’m not. I know something is seriously wrong, but... I don’t know. If you guys don’t want me in on it...”

“It’s complicated,” I said quietly. “Very.”

“I can handle complicated,” he replied with a small smile. “But, hey, it’s your choice. I just know that you aren’t the El you were a few months ago. And Mike was really heartbroken that night when he came to spend the night with us. He was a mess. I never saw him like that...”

I looked down to my feet, ashamed. Lucas went around me to go to the fridge. He took out the pork meat, which had already been put on a plate. He found a big knife in one of the drawers and prepared himself, by rolling up his sleeves, to cut it.

“I’m sorry,” I suddenly said.

Lucas gave me another amused look. “You can’t apologize when I

don't know what's going on."

I licked my lips without knowing what to say. But Lucas did.

"I trust Will with my life because he is my boyfriend and I'm pretty sure I'm going to spend the rest of my life with him. I trust Mike because he has become one of my best friends in the world. And I used to trust you and I want to trust you now..." He looked at me sadly. "Because you were the one that convinced Will to take a chance on me."

I blinked. I was?

"You don't remember that as well," he affirmed, fascinated.

I forced a small smile.

"Interesting, really," he added.

I panicked, without an answer to him, so I just walked away. I called Will, who looked up at me and knew instantly that I needed to talk to him. Standing up, he shot a look at his boyfriend who was still cutting the meat and then followed me to my bedroom.

We sat down next to each other. He looked concerned.

"Lucas knows something is up."

"Yeah..." Will mumbled. "He's not stupid."

I grabbed Will's hand. "He said that I was the one that told you to give him a chance."

Will smiled a bit. "You did... You want to know that?" I nodded. He sighed. "Well, one day, Lucas turned to me and confessed that wanted something more serious. And I panicked because... I wasn't used to guys wanting something serious with me, you know that." I nodded again, remembering all the times he had his heart broken because of douchebags who played with him and used him. "I was the one that always wanted to move things forwards and I always got a no for an answer. Lucas being the one telling me that... It freaked me out. So, I ran away from him. I refused his calls, I refused to see

him.... I pretended he didn't exist for a week. I was scared."

I intertwined our fingers and gave him a squeeze. He smiled.

"That was five years ago. We're more than okay now."

"But... I was the one that talked you into giving him a chance? It doesn't--"

"Yeah, I know," he interrupted me. "Doesn't sound like you at all." He paused, and showed off this cheeky smile. "But, back then, you were already really close friends with Mike. More than friends some of the times. And, although you did not admit that you were basically in love with him, you acted that way. So, when I needed advice and to talk about my emotions, you didn't act like, *ew, emotions, no, what is that?*, but actually listened to me and gave me good advices. Mike did too."

I felt suddenly horrible. I looked down, trying to pushing that awful feeling away, but it stuck to me, to my stomach, and stayed there.

"I will always remember," Will continued with a dreamy expression, "how you and Mike were sitting next to each other on our old sofa, watching some film, and I came home, miserable for the eighth day, and you two just told me, *get over yourself, Will, you are in love with him, go and be happy.*" He looked at me and I forced a small smile. "Mike asked me what kind of feeling I felt when I was with Lucas. That made me think. Was it lust? Was it fun, you know, like 'hey, this is cool, but for now' kind of thing? Or was it more? And I realized that, yeah, it was more. It was so much more. So, I finally called him and he accepted my apology and my explanation... And now here we are."

"That's... amazing," I replied sincerely, despite feeling terrible. If I changed Mike, would I change Will and Lucas' future as well? Because I wouldn't know what love was. I wouldn't like emotions. I would probably just tell Will to do what he thought was best for him and... back then, Will really thought that what was best for him was not to trust boys and just play with them like they had played with him.

*Are you going to change your mind now?*

Was I?

I thought about my mother. Brenner's face came to my mind. No, I couldn't change my mind. I couldn't... I....

"Are you okay?" Will asked, concerned.

I nodded frenetically. "Yup, really okay," I lied. I was always good at lying. I tried not to, but saying 'I'm fine' so many times became too easy to just give it up for the truth.

"Let's go back inside," I added and stood up. "Let's enjoy this Sunday. The week is going to be terrible."

"Oh, yes, the film festival," Will said, standing up and following me out of the room. "I promise I'll be there all days. Lucas will try to be on the first day."

"First day of what?" Lucas asked as we entered the living-room. He was standing behind the sofa, watching something with Mike on the TV.

"El's film festival", Will answered with a smile and walked up to him. He wrapped an arm around his waist.

"Oh, yeah." Lucas gave me a small smile. "I'm trying to take the day off. I'm pretty sure I'll be there."

"Thank you," I said back smiling shyly.

Lucas then turned to Will and whispered something in his ear. Will laughed and called him a dumb-dumb before walking away and going to sit next to Mae on the floor. She was now playing with two dolls and a red car.

Mike changed the TV channel and Lucas went back to the kitchen. I stood there, temporarily confused with myself and with what to do. Everyone was so comfortable, so... home.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I couldn't be undecided. I

couldn't let myself be influenced by this future. I had to think about my mother.

“El.”

I opened my eyes. Mike was standing in front of me, worried. I smiled weakly. “I’m okay.”

## 12. The film festival

### Notes for the Chapter:

I apologize for not having posted this earlier! School has started again and it has been quite a mess. I barely catch a break, honestly. Thank you for sticking around and please enjoy this chapter.

Max and Dustin were unstoppable. They didn't stay still for a second. Something had to be fixed, they were there. Something had to be readjust, they were there. Something had to be done, they were there. And I tried to keep up with them, but, honestly, they were killing me. They were so stressed that they were making me even more stressed.

I finally stopped by Steve's food table. I had invited him to be the food service during the film festival. He had loved the invitation and very happily accepted it, promising to bring the best kind of food to it. He also brought two assistants to help him at the table and we had hired a good catering company to serve during the course of the event.

"Feeling nervous?" He asked me.

"Feeling tired," I mumbled. I had woken up at five am. The film festival would begin at one pm. We had an entire morning to fix every last detail.

"One coffee coming out, then!" Steve exclaimed.

A few seconds later, I had a hot plastic cup of coffee in my hands. I smiled at Steve, who opened the small bag of sugar and poured in the drink for me. "Thank you."

I stirred the coffee for a bit and then took a gulp. It relaxed me.

I saw Max and Dustin coming out of one of the cinema rooms we had. They were talking and walking fast. I turned to Steve and said, "Two more coffees, Steve, please. Those two will need them."

Steve chuckled and prepared the drinks. The moment Max and Dustin arrived, he put them in front of them. They accepted it with a sigh and a sincere thank you.

“You two need to chill,” I said.

They both gave me a murderous look. I took a quiet sip of my coffee.

“Everything is controlled now, *finally*” Dustin replied. “But we need to keep an eye on everything. The first film session will be at two pm, then there were will be a conference and at five pm another session and-“

“Dustin, we know the schedule. We worked on it with you,” I interrupted him and put down my empty plastic cup. Steve took it and threw it into the garbage. “Everything will be fine. Just relax, please.”

“But El, you-“

“Oh, the photographers are here!” Max exclaimed happily.

I looked behind them and saw Jonathan surrounded by two guys and two girls. I smiled and walked up to them, ignoring Dustin’s murmured complain that they were late.

“Jonathan!” I greeted.

He gave me a quick smile. “Hi, El, I’m sorry we’re late... Traffic was kind of a mess and-“

I waved my hand. “No problem! So, the backroom is that way –“ I pointed to the end of the hall, where a corridor began- “Third door to the left.”

“Thank you,” he said with a quick smile and then walked away with his colleagues.

Max and Dustin joined me. They had already drunk their coffees and were checking what was left to do before one pm.

“Our guests will have lunch around midday in ToMaCo restaurant. I’ll



make sure they arrive here at time. You two need to—

“Make sure everything is ready for them, yeah, yeah, yeah,” Max interrupted him. “That part is secure, Dustin, trust me. El and I know what we have to do.”

“Actually, everything is secure. You two are just acting crazy right now,” I commented. They gave me a grumpy look. “What? It’s true!”

“Reporters will be here around one pm too,” Dustin added, looking at his notebook. “The Quickest News newspaper will be our main partner. They will provide us with a five-page article about the festival. Jonathan and his crew better take good pictures for them.”

“They will. Don’t you worry,” I said. My phone suddenly vibrated against my black, plain trousers. I took it out and saw a message from Mike. It had a picture attached of Mae in a cute, pink dress and two ponytails. She was holding her favourite panda while watching TV. I replied *adorable*.

“Are you flirting with your husband instead of focusing on work?” Dustin asked me.

I shot him an offended glance. “Like you’re one to talk, Mister I-need-my-phone-nearby-because-*someone*-might-text-me.” I almost sang the word ‘someone’.

Dustin didn’t reply. He looked down, suddenly sad. I frowned, worried.

“Are you okay?” Max asked, touching his arm.

“Well, Amanda broke up with me, so, there’s that,” he confessed. “Not really okay.”

“Why?” I asked. Now I felt bad for joking with him. Max and I shared a look.

“She said we wanted different things.” He shrugged. “Anyways, I’m going to check on the sound team. See if everything is okay.” Dustin walked away fast, keeping his head down.

I looked at Max.

"Now I feel terrible," Max said. I frowned. "I'm a bad person."

"Why?" I asked. Did Max do something to break them up? She wasn't that kind of person... I mean, I knew her just for a few months, but she didn't seem like one of those people who wanted others to suffer.

"Sometimes I would wish they would break up," she confessed shyly.

"Oh, Max." I wrapped an arm around her and petted her back. "That doesn't make you a bad person." I said. "Trust me, I've met a few bad people in my life. You aren't one of them."

She gave me a sad smile.

Faster would I be accused of being a bad person than Max. She was just in love with someone who didn't notice it. I was on the edge of changing my life and, consequently, the lives of the ones around me.

*Would Max and Dustin's lives change as well?*, the sudden thought occurred to me.

"I'm going to check... uh, something," Max said and walked away as well.

I stood there, with nothing to do, and looked around, trying to find something occupy myself with. I saw Steve talking to his co-workers. I saw the catering team in a circle, hearing their supervisor. Jonathan and his crew came out, each one equipped with a gigantic camera. The security team was already doing their job.

I sighed and decided to walk to the bathrooms to pass the time. There were three different bathrooms situated near each "cinema-room". We had rented this huge building which usually held conferences and three of the rooms would be used to premiere short films, followed by a quick interview with the director, producers and actors. Mike's sister, Nancy, would be a guest who was going to have a small session in one of the rooms to discuss the making of films, focusing on the screenplay writing process. We had other guests to focus on areas like music, producing and even marketing. Dustin knew this guy who he had gone to college with that made the best (according

to Dustin) film promotional campaigns he had ever seen.

I took a good look at myself in the bathroom's gigantic mirror. I was dressed very fancy and formal. Both Max and I were wearing black, plain trousers and, while she had a blue blouse, I had a red one. She had her red hair in a huge braid and I had recently had mine cut by the shoulders and its ends were a bit curly.

Everything was going to be alright. We worked hard to make this event great and, besides Jonathan's delay, things were going well. We could do this.

And I wasn't going to let myself be haunted by bad thoughts. I couldn't do that today. I had to stay focus.

I left the bathroom after washing my hands. I saw Dustin in his dark blue coat and I knew he was about to leave to have lunch with some of our guests. As the Head of the Cultural Department, he was the face people wanted to see. Max and I would have lunch around here with the workers. Steve was going to grant us with an amazing lunch as well.

Mike promised to stop by around two pm. He didn't want to bring Mae into the flood of people's arrival. Will and Lucas would come as well. Lucas had managed to take the day off. He even sent me a message to let me know. Stupidly enough, I almost cried with it. Every little detail that reminded me of the messed-up situation I was in made me want to cry. That was why I focused so much in making this film festival great. I didn't want to be reminded that I would never meet Mike, that Mae would never exist or Will would never give Lucas a chance to be a happy.

It shouldn't be like this. My life changing shouldn't change others. It was a stupid way of thinking, I knew that. People's lives were all mingled together. I understood that the moment I received the news that my dad had passed away bravely in a fire and my life turned upside-down. This time, I just kept wishing lives didn't work like that. Just so Will could be happy. Or little Mae could still exist.

And maybe she would exist. At least, half of her. If Mike met someone and fell in love with them as he fell for me. Maybe it would

be Samantha, his date for the night we had met. Maybe it would be a girl from his course. Maybe a colleague. Someone. Just someone that could give him the happiness he deserved. Meanwhile, I would have my mother safe from a terrible man and she wouldn't have to wake up every day without knowing that the man she loved was bad. I would tell her before the wedding news came. I would tell her right after that party. I had to. I had to let her know who she has been spending her life with these past years.

"El, let's go eat." Max pulled my arm. There was a small room in the floor below prepared for us to eat. The catering staff had been the first one to eat, having to yet prepare the small snacks they would be passing around during the event. Then, the security team divided itself and half ate first and the rest second. Now, it would be us, the photographers and Steve and his assistants.

Max was quiet during the meal, checking her phone once in a while. Steve was the one making most of the conversation, especially with jokes and amusing comments that made people chuckle.

We ate fast and around one pm we were ready to welcome the journalists. I was standing in the middle of the lobby, making sure I welcomed everyone and gave them the directions to where to go, when I saw her. Samantha. Petit as she used to be, with her big, blue eyes staring at me in shock. Didn't she know I was part of the event? She must have researched us, right?

She walked up to me with her cameraman and a shy smile.

"Good afternoon," I greeted formally. "Our first session will be in room 2, that way –" I pointed to where Max was greeting other guests – "and it will be at 2 pm. Meanwhile, everything you need, you can talk to me, to Max over there or to our head of the department, Dustin Henderson."

Samantha hesitated in talking. She stared at me unsure of what to do or say.

"T-thank you," she finally replied, and, with a small nod to her camera man, they walked away.

I took a deep breath and received the following journalists with a forced smile.

Guests started arriving shortly after with Dustin. He was the one controlling everything, telling people to make themselves at home, to enjoy themselves and to follow the schedule in order to have a great time here. I saw Nancy arriving and right away being took by a journalist. One of Jonathan's mates took pictures of her.

After making sure everything was running smoothly, I approached Steve's stand and asked him for another coffee.

"Yes, ma'am!" He exclaimed happily. One of his assistants was serving other guests, showing them what kind of treats they had. "Here you go, miss El."

"Thank you, Steve," I replied taking the coffee. I poured some sugar and stirred it, while watching the guests and journalists interact. Max was still near the conference room where the first short film would be shown.

I looked at my watch. Fifteen minutes to two.

Finally, I saw Mike walk into the lobby, followed by Will and Lucas, who was holding Mae. She had this huge smile and was looking all around, amazed by the people. I drank the rest of the coffee, put down the cup and walked up to them happily. I hugged Mike, who used the hug as a way to kiss my neck. I smiled at him and then moved on to greet Will and Lucas. Finally, I took little Mae into arms and gave her a huge kiss on the cheek.

"Do you guys want something to eat?" I asked them. "Steve's stand is right over there." I pointed over my shoulder to where Steve was now serving one of the journalists.

"Ohh, great! Lucas, come. You always complain that I never take you there," Will said as he grabbed his boyfriend's hand and started pulling him away.

"I talked about it once!" Lucas exclaimed, offended.

I looked at Mike, who was checking the lobby and the people talking.

He suddenly saw his sister and gave me a small smile. "Maybe we should go over there," he said nicely.

I agreed and followed him to where his sister was being interviewed. I stopped suddenly, seeing Samantha. Mike recognized her as well and gave me a small, confused look. But it was too late to explain it to him that I hadn't known she would be here and it was quite a surprise for me as well to see her here. Nancy had seen her brother and said loudly, "Mike!"

They shared a hug and then she took little Mae from me. She talked to Samantha, unaware that there was history between us, and introduced her to her favourite niece.

"Of course, she is the only one," she added with a small chuckle. Then, she gave Mike a glance. "For now."

Mike and I blushed crazily. Samantha looked away, uncomfortable. I didn't understand how it could be so weird, being next to her, when the last time I remembered being with her was at a party and we were fine. Now, just the fact that I knew something had gone wrong in our friendship made everything awkward.

"Anyways, the first session is about to start, right?" Nancy kept talking. I nodded. "Are you guys going in?"

"I have to stay here," I excused myself.

"I'll stay with her," Mike said.

"Oh, no, come with me, little brother," Nancy asked nicely. Mike gave her a short glare. "What?"

"Don't pull your I'm-so-nice face."

Nancy kept staring at him, begging with her blue eyes. Behind her, Samantha's attention was focused on little Mae, who was staring back at her in curiosity. Mae was always so curious, she wanted to know everyone and everything around her. The cameraman pointed the camera to her and that's when I stepped in.

"Don't film her, please," I almost demanded. And maybe my voice

didn't come off as nice as it was supposed to be.

There was a quiet and awkward moment. Then, Nancy finally pulled Mike to the film session, after giving me Mae. She was too young to see the kind of shorts films we were showing and she would most likely get bored middle way and make a fuss.

I looked at Samantha and her cameraman. He seemed confused, noticing the tension, yet not understanding why it was there.

"The session is going to start soon," I told them with a forced smile and then walked away with Mae in my arms.

"Eleven, wait."

I stopped. Samantha said something to her cameraman and he walked into the conference's room direction.

"Can we talk?" Samantha asked after she approached me.

I thought for a second and then nodded.

"Let me just give Mae to someone," I murmured.

I walked to Steve's food table. He was so happy to see little Mae and even happier to take care of her while I talked to Samantha. He promised her right away pancakes and all kind of sweets.

"Don't spoil her too much, Steve, come on," I said in a joking tone of voice before walking back to Samantha.

She was going to open her mouth and talk, when I stopped her. "Didn't you know I would be here?" I asked.

She nodded shyly. "I just wasn't expecting to see you right away. I don't know... I... Wishful thinking, I guess." She paused, glancing around, nervous. I just waited. "I'm sorry, okay?"

I blinked. And she took my reaction as something bad, so she kept going, "I know what I said those years ago was rude... Very, very rude and... I regret it."

I didn't know what she had said to me. How was I supposed to react now? I can't just forgive her. If the kind of words she said to me were enough to break our friendship apart, then a simple 'I'm sorry' wasn't enough, right? Anyways, what would be the point of accepting her apology if I was going to change all of this?

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Samantha asked me, scared.

I shrugged.

"I don't know what to say," I replied honestly.

Her expression fell. She was sad, looking down, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, really. I... I was young and stupid. You were my best friend and it was wrong of me to say those things..."

"What did you say?" The words left my mouth before I could stop them. because I needed to know what had happened. I needed to know the words she had used.

Samantha blinked, confused. "I-What?"

"Tell me what you said to me all those years ago," I asked.

"Why?"

"Because I want to hear you say them," I answered calmly. The lobby was almost empty now since the first session had begun. Only Steve and his crew could be heard entertaining little Mae. Some of the catering staff was around as well.

Samantha hesitated, looking away at first, thinking if she should actually do it; if I was actually just making fun of her. But I wasn't. I needed to know what had happened.

"I said you were a naïve bitch," she finally confessed. "That the only reason why you were with Mike was because you needed someone to love you. Because of your dad. Because of your mom being happy with someone who wasn't your dad." She paused, licking her lips. "I... I said the only reason you two were together, having a baby, was because I had asked Mike out. So, you know.... I called you a thief."



I stared at her, astonished. I couldn't believe Samantha had really said those things to me, that she had been that cruel. We used to have a non-judgmental friendship. She made a mistake, I made the wrong decision, we talked about it and never judged each other.

"I was stupid, so fucking stupid, El," she continued. "And I was in a bad place, stuck in a terrible first job, having no luck in any of my relationships." She shrugged. "I just got so mad and laid all my frustration on you. It wasn't right."

I nodded. It hadn't been right. But I didn't just take it quietly. I knew myself.

"What did I call you?" I asked.

She looked confused.

"Just remind me, Sammy."

At her old nickname, Samantha reacted. She moved her feet, awkward and uncomfortable.

"You said I was an arrogant bitch who fell for every single guy that gave me attention. You also said that I had mommy issues," she told me.

I closed my eyes. I could be a total bitch whenever someone attacked me.

"And it's quite true."

"No, it is not," I replied, opening my eyes. "Everyone has some kind of issues. I shouldn't have attacked you through them."

She shrugged. "I attacked you too."

I looked at her closely. It would be pointless to make things up with her now, in this messed-up situation, I knew that, yet, being face to face with her, seeing how sorry and miserable she was, I just wanted to tell her it was alright, that, yes, we were fine, because, at least, I could make someone happy. At least, I would do one good thing in this future.

"It's okay," I finally said. She looked at me in shock. "We're fine, Sammy."

"R-really?"

I nodded. "And I'm sorry too. For the things I said. But it's in the past now."

And it wasn't going to actually happen after I changed wha-who I had to change.

A small smile started showing on Samantha's face. I tried to do the same, yet it felt too forced. The Samantha that was my best friend would notice right away that I wasn't okay. This Samantha, who hadn't spoken to me in years, didn't seem to have perceived any insincerity in my smile.

I suddenly heard little Mae's whines and looked behind my shoulder to see her trying to get out of Steve's lap. "Let her come, Steve!" I shouted.

Steve gave me a small nod and put Mae down. She started her almost skipping walk towards me. I leaned down to grab her. Samantha smiled at us.

"She seems so sweet," she commented.

Mae took the chance to be closer to my head to grab my hair. "Oh, no, Mae!" I exclaimed instead of answering Samantha. "Don't ruin my hair today, please." But, of course, she didn't seem to care, or understand. "Ugh."

"Do you need any help?" Samantha asked politely, stepping a bit closer.

I shook my head. "Nah, she'll get bored and I'll go to the bathroom to fix it."

Samantha just smiled, a bit awkward. It was such a weird moment, being next to each other, after apologizing to one another. There were still years of no-talking between us. There was still the messed-up situation I was facing that she didn't know about hanging around

us, like it was watching me, trying to see what I was going to do next

“She looks like Mike,” Samantha finally spoke. “But she has your nose.”

“Yeah, and eyes,” I added. Mae laid her head on my shoulder. Instead of pulling my hair, she was now playing softly with it. “She is great.” And I didn’t know if those three words I said were for Samantha and for me.

“I see life has been treating you good.”

I forced a smile and controlled the nauseating feeling in my throat.

“Yeah, I suppose. Well, not everything is good,” I said.

“Of course...” Samantha kept her shy smile on.

“How about you?” I asked to stop the awkward silence before it got bad. “How’s life?”

And then I stayed there, with Mae almost falling asleep on my shoulder and listening to Samantha talking shyly about these past few years. It seemed like her life was going well. She was looking forwards to a promotion after covering this event and she was seeing someone. His names was Kyle. It was all new, so who knew where it would go?

“I hope you’re happy.” And my words were sincere.

“Thank you, El... I hope you are too.”

Only a small flow of people leaving the conference room stopped me from crying. I saw Mike among them. He walked up to us and took Mae from my arms. She laid her tiny head on his shoulder, trying to find a good position to fall asleep.

“Well, I’m going to leave you two to be,” Samantha talked before anyone could. “It was good to see you, El. You too, Mike.”

“Yeah, right. You too,” Mike mumbled, confused, and she walked away. She looked at me. “What happened?”

“We kind of made up?”

He blinked. “Really?”

I nodded. “Yeah... I mean, I wasn’t going to, but then she apologized and told me what had happened and... I thought, maybe someone should be happy in this? I mean, I-“ I shut myself up and closed my eyes. Mike hugged me and I felt the tears escaping. I sobbed quietly against his chest. I felt Mae’s little hand on my hair, caressing it in her sleepy state. Mike kissed my forehead.

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” I mumbled. Because I was being a horrible human being and I couldn’t stop myself from being it. I had made my decision. I couldn’t back down now.

“You can’t be sad today, El. This is your day. Yours, and Max’s, and Dustin’s.” Mike pulled me a bit away and, with only one hand, tried to clean my tears. “In three days, we can talk about this and you can cry as much as you want. But not during the event. You put so much effort on it...”

I took a deep breath, trying to control the sobs. Mae was staring at me, sad, and her tiny hand was trying to caress my cheek. I smiled at her.

“God, I need to go to the bathroom now,” I complained, cleaning the rest of the tears. I had traces of black on of my fingers. “I need to redo my make-up.”

“No, you don’t. Just... clean it a bit and it’ll be great,” Mike said with a smile.

I gave him a short glare. “You clearly don’t know how this works.”

“I just know that you are looking amazing today.”

I rolled my eyes, still feeling a couple of small sobs stuck in my throat, begging to come out. I needed some five minutes alone. “Oh, God, you’re so terrible, Mike.” He chuckled. “I’m going to the bathroom. If Max or Dustin ask for me,-“

“I know, babe, don’t you worry about a thing.”

I gave him a small smile and leaned up to leave a kiss on his cheek.  
“Thank you.”

### 13. The broken hearts

“Our main goal was to give short films the kind of attention it deserves,” Dustin said to a sea of reporters, who were surrounding him. he had a huge, proud smile on his face. “And, of course, the entire process is something very interesting. I mean, it’s film-making we are talking about here.”

Max and I shared a quick smile.

It was the last day of the film festival. The second day had been a bit of a slow day, with less exciting things to show, but today, being the grand finale, people were pouring in the building, craving some short films and conferences. Nancy was here once again, giving small interviews and preparing herself to give the last, big speech. She had felt honoured when we asked her to do it despite being a last-minute kind of decision.

I felt someone tugging my arm. Mike had a scared look on his face. I frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“My sister just asked me why I never told her our daughter’s godfather had a brother.”

My frowned deepened.

“Lucas only has sisters,” I replied.

“She meant Will’s brother,” he said deadpan.

“Oh, Jonathan!” I exclaimed. Max walked suddenly away, moving towards Steve’s food table. “Well, I don’t have an answer to her question since, you know, I don’t even remember...”

He sighed and dropped an arm around my waist.

“She had a look on her face. I didn’t like it.”

I laughed. “Oh, Mike, let her be,” I told him and kissed his cheek

warmly. Then, curious, I looked around for Jonathan and found him taking pictures of a couple of guests. Nearby, there was Will taking care of Mae and talking to some film producer.

“But that isn’t even the worst part,” Mike suddenly admitted. I gave him a confused look. “She also asked me about Steve.”

I laughed some more. Mike didn’t seem amused with the situation.

“Your sister is a grown woman, Mike. If she wants to have a threesome with Will’s brother and our favourite waffle maker, –“ And he made a face when I said that, which made me laugh a bit –“then, let her have it.”

“That idea hadn’t even crossed my mind, but thank you so much for putting it in there,” he replied sarcastically.

“You’re welcome, babe.” I smirked slightly, making him roll his eyes, and then me laughing.

“Will you stop? Please!”

“I’m- I’m sorry!” I chuckled. “I’m trying. I-I swear!”

“El!” Max walked up to me with a very serious expression. “Can you come with me, please? There’s a problem in conference room number 2, with the sound system.”

“Oh, sure.” I gave Mike one last look and he smiled at me reassuringly.

I walked away with Max fast and down the corridor where the room was. I walked in and saw it was empty.

“Where’s the sound system team?” I asked, getting ready to complain since if there was a problem, they should be here by now fixing it. Dustin would kill anyone who did not do their work right today.

Max bit her lip shyly. “I lied.”

I looked at her, concerned.

“What’s wrong?”

She sighed and leaned against one of the chairs’ back. She didn’t look me in the eyes. I took a hesitant step towards her, worried.

“I overheard Dustin on the phone a few minutes ago,” she confessed and looked down, ashamed. Or was it sad? “He was begging his stupid ex to come back. El...” She finally looked at me with tears in her eyes. “It hurts.”

I approached her and gave her a hug that I knew she pretended not to want at first, before finally wrapping her arms around me too and crying quietly.

“It’s okay, Max. It will be okay.”

*A broken heart only heals with one thing: time*, my English teacher would say during her class monologues that did not have anything to do with our study material. She always did that: rant about other things, very interesting things, instead of teaching us about grammar and literacy themes. That thought, the one about broken hearts, had stuck with me and it was the kind of thing I would say to Will and Samantha after someone hurt them. It was the kind of thing that used to make me wonder why people fell in love. Because if it went wrong, then only time could fix it. And sometimes time was a bitch.

“He needs time to get over her,” I said.

“Yes, I know,” she murmured and sobbed quietly. She pulled away and cleaned her tears. “I’m okay. I just... It’s nto about me, you know? It’s about him.”

I nodded. “Yes, I understand.”

It would pain me too if I had to see Mike hurting.

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It truly felt like three days in hell, but we managed to do it and the film festival was considered a success by the critics. Max, Dustin and I received the biggest praises from our boss and the reviews being published were mostly good ones (one or two said it could have gone better and pointed out some flaws, but we accepted them as



constructive reviews that could help us in the future). The article done by The Quickest News newspaper was amazingly well-done and our company was enjoying the spotlight while it lasted. Of course, we had allegedly started to think about what to do next. We had given hints to some reporters that more events like these would pop up around the year and we were indeed thinking about them... Well, we weren't, but after a two-day break we would.

"I feel like I haven't slept in two years," I grumbled, laying down on my belly on the bed. Blindly, I pulled a pillow to me and dragged my head to it. I sighed in relief.

"Don't you need a shower before sleeping?" I heard Mike's voice.

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

I heard him laughing, and then his steps coming closer. The bed's weight changed and I felt his body heat next to me. His hand touched my back, under the t-shirt I was wearing, and I moaned quietly.

"I barely touched you," Mike said with a smug tone of voice.

"I'm needy," I replied. He chuckled. "I just spent three days going back and forwards, doing the same thing over and over, fixing what was wrong before anyone noticing..." I shifted my position and turned around. I felt Mike's hand against my skin following my movement and landing on my stomach, near my bra. "I deserve a break."

Mike shot me an amused glance. "What do you want in that "break" of yours?"

I smiled sleepily. "A shower, a massage and a snuggle?"

"Your demands are too high," Mike joked. I slapped his leg playfully. He laughed. "I can do that for you, but you have to cooperate with me."

I frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you have to get up and walk to the bathroom."

I groaned.

“Don’t want to do that. Carry me.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “I’m going to pretend that you did not just say that and I’m going to inform you that, unfortunately, carrying you around hasn’t been my biggest achievement in life.”

I stared at him. “You’re joking.”

He shook his head. “Nope, the few times I tried to carry you, we ended up on the floor.”

I tried to control myself, but a laugh burst out of my throat and I couldn’t stop it. Mike pretended to pout and be mad. I just kept laughing.

“Seriously? You’re not gonna stop?” He asked after a while.

“Oh God...” I sat up, with tears in my eyes from laughing so much, and pulled him to my arms. “You’re amazing, Wheeler.”

He snorted. “Yeah, yeah, Hopper. You say that now.”

A while back, Mike told me that, when we got married, I informed him that I was going to keep my last name, whether he liked it or not. He confessed that, at first, he had been a bit annoyed since he really wanted me to have his last name, but then he moved on, understanding that I was going to keep it because of my dad. It was the last thing I had of him and I couldn’t get rid of it just like that. So, it was fine that I was introduced as Hopper and he as Wheeler. It was fine that people thought our daughter being named Mae Hopper Wheeler was weird. It was all fine since we had each other and we never stopped each other from wanting what we wanted and from being who we were.

“Are you done laughing now?” Mike asked.

I pulled back. “Yes, I am. Shower?” I asked with a big smile.

He snorted. “After you, milady.” He made a small gesture with his hand, pointing to the door.

I laughed and stood up, pulling him with me. Mae was staying with Will and Lucas for the night since I had left the film festival so late – it was three in the morning – and Mike had stayed up behind to help us finish everything and then drive me home.

Mike closed the bathroom's door behind him while I turned on the water in the shower. We helped each other undressed and then he grabbed me and put me inside the shower.

I laughed. "Wow, you can carry me, after all," I said, positioning myself under the warm water.

"This wasn't carrying you. This was shifting you from one place to another." He closed the see-through door in our shower behind him while giving me a cheeky smile.

I snorted. "Right, Mike, like those two words aren't somehow similar."

"Well, no," he replied, wrapping his arms around my waist. The water started falling down on his face and he closed his eyes. "Carrying means I *moved* you from one place to another. Shifting means that-" I interrupted him with a kiss. He chuckled against my lips.

Mike washed my hair gently, while I had my arms wrapped around his waist and my face leaned against his chest. His hands moved methodically and massaged my scalp right where I needed. I sighed happily.

After showering, I blow-dried my hair in front of the bathroom's mirror while Mike took the time to prepare us two cups of hot chocolate. He said I would have a wonderful night of sleep if I just found the energy to stay up to drink hot chocolate.

"Besides, tomorrow you can sleep all day," he said, coming into the bedroom with the drinks in his hands. He gave me one and then put his down on the bedside-table for a moment, while he got into the bed and spread the sheets on him.

"When does Mae come back?" I asked, taking a sip of the hot

chocolate. It was so good.

“Around three pm? Will is bringing her. Lucas has to work.”

“Hum, okay. When do you have that meeting with your agent?” I knew he talked about it and was really nervous about what his agent had to say, but I didn't remember when he said it would happen. These past three days mixed my entire memory. I couldn't even remember what had happened five days ago if someone asked me.

“On Friday. I have to remind him that we're taking a week off at the end of the month.” Mike leaned back on the bed's wooden headboard and sighed. “He always forgets these things.”

“Why are you taking the week off?” I asked, confused.

He gave me a confused look. “El, .... We're going to Hawkins, remember?”

I blinked. I heard about that. Max had told me, but it had happened when Mike and I were kind of fighting, so I never got around to talk to him about it.

“Oh, I never told you, did I?” He realized. “I'm sorry. Well,-“

“I know about it. Max told me... a while ago. And then Will also explained. I... I just didn't remember it being so soon.”

“Well, it's Joyce's birthday, so...”

“Yeah, I know. I just... I don't know.” I put down my almost empty cup and then moved closer to Mike, leaning my head on his shoulder. “Have we gone there before?”

“A couple of times. Mae has gone as well. Joyce loves her.” Mike wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer to him. “Are you scared?”

“Yes,” I confessed. “Last time I remember going there... It was Christmas and... And I thought things with my mom were okay. We actually managed to have a fun day together. Then, of course, Brenner came home from work and...” I closed my eyes. “How do I

manage to go there now?”

“Well, you do it for many people, but... more for Mae,” he said. “She loves going to Hawkins. We usually take her to your dad’s grave, to your old school and places you used to hang out. We try to avoid your old house... I... I don’t think we have actually gone there. Not since your mom’s wedding and Mae wasn’t even born back then.”

“It makes sense,” I murmured. Of course, I wouldn’t want Mae near that man. “Did my mom ever want to know about Mae?”

“I... I don’t even think she knows?”

I looked up at Mike, frowning. “She doesn’t know?”

“At least, not from us... You two weren’t talking by the time we found out you were pregnant... We never talked about telling her... Unless you told her on your own.”

“Do you think I did?” I asked, worried.

“No,” he answered and gave me a short smile. “One thing we always agreed on, since the beginning, was that, no matter what, no matter where life would lead us, we would always be on the same page when it came to Mae. Always.”

I smiled softly and laid my head back again on his chest. I felt his lips against my head and sighed. “That’s good,” I commented. And then I felt sad. The hand I had laid on Mike’s stomach clutched.

“What is it?” Mike asked.

“Would you do the same if you were in my situation?”

Mike didn’t reply.

“Would you...” I licked my lips, nervous. “If it was your mom married to someone like... like... *him*, and you were given a chance to change it, would you do it?”

Mike still didn’t say anything, so I looked up again. He was staring at nowhere, deep in thoughts.

“Mike,” I called.

He blinked.

“I don’t know,” he answered sincerely. “It would depend on the situation I was also living.”

And I knew what he meant. He wouldn’t change me. He wouldn’t change Mae.

I nodded sadly and looked down again, hiding my face against his t-shirt. It had always been quite obvious that he was the better one of the two of us. But did it make me a bad person, wanting to save my mother from a bad marriage? Was it selfish of me to want her to get away from that horrible man, who had hurt me?

“Do you think...” I stopped myself.

“What is it?” Mike asked gently.

I gulped. “Do you think that, maybe... just maybe, we might meet again?”

I felt Mike’s lips on my forehead. They formed a smile. A sad smile.

“I want to believe we will.”

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“A painting festival?”

Dustin nodded eagerly. Max seemed as uncertain as I was.

“Do you think it’s the best step to take after a film festival?” I asked Dustin, worried. “Don’t you think we should.... I don’t know... Follow a certain line of ideas? Like... I don’t know, maybe a music festival?”

“Or an animation film festival?” Max suggested. I agreed with her and we shared a smile.

Dustin frowned deeply.

“What’s wrong with a painting festival?”

“Nothing,” I answered. “Just... maybe it would be better received after other festivals... I don’t know. Max?”

“I don’t know either. I mean, you’re the boss.” Max gave him the thumbs up, trying to make him feel better.

But Dustin just kept on frowning and sat back against his chair with his arms crossed. He seemed sadder than frustrated or angry at our lack of enthusiasm.

“Are you okay?”

He looked up at me and shrugged.

“I just... I’m being silly. Sorry, guys.” He stood up. “I’m going to grab a coffee. Do you want one?”

Max and I shook our heads. He left the office, closing the door softly behind him. I gave Max a look.

“What?” She asked, confused.

I motioned with my head to the door with a knowing look. She kept staring at me, completely confused. I sighed, frustrated.

“Go talk to him!”

Her eyes widened and she shook her head frenetically. “No way, El, no way I’m getting into their drama. Are you insane? He still likes her a lot. What am I supposed to do?”

“Give him a shoulder to cry on?” I suggested.

She snorted. “Yeah, because that’s what I want, to be the rebound girl.”

“No, you’re being his friend,” I said and stood up. I grabbed my wallet from my bag.

“Where are you going?”

“Well, someone has to be his friend,” I replied and left the room.

Dustin was at the end of the corridor, leaning against the wall, by the coffee machine. There was a group of co-workers talking to each other a few meters away. They were laughing and joking around.

I touched Dustin’s arm and he jumped, surprised, almost spilling his cup of coffee.

“Shit, El, you scared me.”

“Sorry,” I apologized. I looked at the machine and then pressed one option, checking its price. I took out a couple of coins and inserted them before requesting a small cappuccino. “How are you?”

Dustin made a face.

“I’ve been better. I mean...” He threw his empty cup into the trash bin angrily. “What kind of bullshit is ‘We like each other, yes, but we will face too many obstacles to be together, so it’s better to just end it now’? Like... Fine, I get it, okay? We don’t work well together. But she shouldn’t have started that crap with ‘we like each other’. At least, say ‘we don’t like each other enough’, and I’ll take it better. You know?”

I nodded, taking a quiet sip from my cappuccino.

“And... I really liked her and, if I were to break up with her, I would... I don’t know... Be better than what she was?” Dustin looked really sad. “Because I think... Well, I thought she deserved a better break-up than telling the other person a bunch of crap from films and hoping it sticks.”

I finished my drink and threw out the plastic cup. Then, I touched Dustin’s arm and caressed it gently. He looked away, ashamed.

“My dad used to tell me that hurt helps to see us clear,” I said. He gave me a short glance, before looking down at his feet. “Maybe this heartbreak has to happen... for something else... to come.”



He snorted. "Right. El, come on, you know me... I suck at this love shit. I know I do and it's okay, really. It just... It hurts."

"For now," I added.

He smiled softly, almost sadly. "Yeah, for now. So, you're going to Hawkins in a couple of weeks, right?"

I nodded. We started walking back to our office.

"Yeah, for a week. You don't mind, do you?"

Dustin opened the door. Max jumped on her seat, surprised to see us back already.

"Oh no, it's fine. I mean, Max and I can handle it for a week. Right, Max?" He asked and approached her to lay a hand on her shoulder.

She nodded mechanically.

"You guys are talking about El's vacation?"

"Yup. Her family trip," Dustin joked, pulling a chair and sitting down. "While we do her dirty work here."

"As if," I replied and threw him a piece of crumpled paper, which hit him on the face and then fell on the floor.

"Have you guys bought Will's mother a gift?" Max asked, leaning down to catch the paper I had thrown.

"No... I have to talk to Mike about that, actually."

"Give her another fake grandkid," Dustin said. I glared at him. "What? She loves Mae, doesn't she? Or am I confusing people?" He looked at Max for reassurance. But she just shrugged her shoulders like she didn't know. "Well, anyways, I think you should do it."

"Dustin!" Max pretended to be shocked, but then laughed.

I hid my face behind the computer screen, lowering my body so

they wouldn't see me. The fact that I was embarrassed made them laugh.

"Don't you guys think about that?" Max suddenly asked.

I peeked over the screen, suspicious. "About what?"

She snorted. "Having more kids. Giving Mae siblings."

I blushed and hid again. No, this El didn't think about that. Did the other present-in-this-future El think about having kids? Did she discuss it with Mike?

"Eeeell," Max sang and I felt her presence over my computer screen. She was leaning entirely over her desk, so she could take a look at me.

I groaned.

"You guys only know how to embarrass me, honestly," I mumbled.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you so much for reading. I hope you enjoyed it.

## 14. Hawkins

I was restless and nervous. Mike threw me glances over and over again during our flight, while a sleeping Mae laid on his lap. I kept looking out of the window, biting my fingernails, touching my hair or rearranging my position in the comfortable seat. In twenty minutes, we were going to land. Jonathan would pick us up at the airport. I would see Joyce. The last time I remember seeing her was during Christmas, when my mother made me go back home to spend the holiday with the family. Family. Right. I tried really hard not to fight with her when she used that word in our phone conversation and accepted the fact that I had to go home and spent two weeks with her and Brenner.

I saw Joyce on my second day back in Hawkins when I went to visit Will. She always managed to look young, despite her age. She tried to smile as often as she could, always proud of her two little boys and, for some reason, of me. I always believed it had something to do with my dad being who he had been. She and Jim Hopper had been best friends since they were kids and sometimes I would hear people saying they did not understand how those two didn't end up together because everyone was betting on them to do so. Sometimes I saw myself being one of those people, wondering why they didn't become a couple and have their perfect family. Then, I would remember I wouldn't be here, nor Will, nor Jonathan, if they had done that.

"El," Mike called. I looked at him. "It's going to be okay."

I forced a small smile and didn't say anything. I didn't feel like talking, honestly. I felt sick in my stomach, like I was going to throw up. I hated this town. Brenner made me hate it, after years and years of loving it and being my home. That man came and ruined it for me.

What if I ran into them in the supermarket? Or in the streets? Or in a restaurant? Anywhere, really. What if I saw them?

*"I don't understand why it's so hard to convince you to come home, Jane, honestly," my mother complained while we prepared some desserts together.*

*It had been a good day. We were good. Of course, her small comment had to destroy it. The hands. The smirk. The evilness in the eyes. They came back to me out of the blue and I dropped the bowl I had been holding. It crashed on the floor, spreading flour everywhere.*

*“Jane Hopper, honestly!” My mother sighed and went to find a broom.*

Mike and I went through the entire process of leaving the airplane and finding our luggage. Then, we waited for Jonathan outside the airport for ten minutes, with a very awake and excited Mae in our arms. She was pointing at everything like it was amazing, despite being ordinary things like a bus, or cars, or trees. We still had a thirty-minute ride to Hawkins.

“El, calm down, please,” Mike whispered on my ear before leaving a quick kiss on my cheek. He took Mae from my arms. I blinked, confused. “She feels your anxiety.”

I finally saw how edgy Mae was, looking at me with her big brown eyes worried and her tiny arms wrapped around Mike’s neck, like he was supporting her, protecting her from my nervousness.

I sighed and touched Mae’s back. “I’m sorry,” I apologized, laying my head against Mike’s chest.

Jonathan finally shown up, in a black truck, and helped Mike put our bags in the trunk. I sat on the back seat with Mae on my lap. I was trying to put on the seatbelt in order to fit us both, but she didn’t stop still.

“Mae, come on, cooperate with me,” I asked gently and she finally sat quietly, staring at me with her little mouth open. Finally, I managed to put the seatbelt on, hearing the final click of it entering the small black piece in the seat.

Mike sat in the front with Jonathan and they made small chat with each other, while I played with Mae’s hair and tried to calm myself down.

I didn’t have to see my mother. I didn’t have to see Brenner. I was here for Joyce. I could be okay.

“Will and Lucas are already here,” Jonathan said, looking at me through the rear mirror. I gave him a small smile. “They say they have some news. Do you guys know anything about that?”

I shook my head. Mike chuckled.

“What?” I frowned. “You know something?”

Mike shrugged. “No idea.”

He was a terrible liar.

Hawkins finally came into view. I saw familiar houses, streets, even some people. Benny’s place was opened and, as I watched it pass by, it was like I could almost taste his delicious hamburgers and French fries. Mae was trying to take a good look at the sights as well, excited. I smiled softly at her.

“We have time to explore everything, yes, dear?” I kissed her small head. She giggled excited.

The Byers’ house was a bit further away from the town’s centre. I remembered Will used to take his bike to school whenever his mother or his brother couldn’t drive him there. And every time I escaped from my home to go spend the afternoon or the night at his place, I used to walk for about twenty minutes or more. I never minded doing it. I knew Hawkins like the back of my hand and I had always felt safe there. Until...

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *No, El, just no.*

Will and Lucas were outside, waiting for us. Jonathan parked the truck next to a dark blue car, certainly belonging to Joyce. We got out of the car and Will came right away to take Mae from my arms and greet her with huge, sounding kisses on her cheeks. Lucas followed him, smiling widely. Something was unusual happy with those two.

Finally, a woman in her forties came out of the house, holding her arms out for little Mae. She had a huge smile on her face. Her brown hair was longer than the last time I had seen her, but her kindness was there. The way she looked at Mae with such tenderness made me

feel at peace. Joyce Byers was here.

With Mae in her arms, Joyce approached me with a caring smile and hugged me tightly. I felt like crying in the moment her only free arm surrounded me. I felt like telling her everything that was going on and asking her for advice. I knew Joyce would tell me something worth listening to.

“How have you been, sweetie?” She asked, while trying to take Mae’s gripping hand from her hair.

“I’ve been okay... And you? Everything’s okay around here?”

She smiled. “Oh, of course. Nothing big ever happens in Hawkins, you know that, sweetie. Well, hello to you too, Michael.”

Mike approached us shyly, holding one of our bags. “Hello, Mrs. Byers.”

“Joyce,” she corrected.

He just blushed and muttered something about the bag. He walked in the house followed by Will and Lucas. I frowned, confused. Joyce laughed.

“Oh, that boy of yours will never stop being shy around me, will he?”

I smiled, confused, and said nothing.

“Well, let’s go in, shall we?” She said, giving Mae a small kiss on the nose. My daughter giggled, excited.

Joyce’s house was the same as it had always been. The same kitchen, the same living-room, the same corridor leading to the bedrooms and bathroom. It felt like home. I smiled, comfortable.

I saw Mike suddenly coming out from where I remembered Jonathan’s room to be. I frowned, confused. Jonathan noticed it and said, “you’re staying in my bedroom, like usual.” He sounded a bit suspicious with my confusion.

“Oh,” I let out. “Of course. How could I forget?”

Mike closed the distance between us and wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me closer. I felt safer when he was closer and he knew that. Having some part of him touching some part of me was his way of ensuring me that I was not alone and he was here to help me.

“Well, there isn’t much to do around here today,” Joyce confessed, playing with Mae’s little hand. She gave us a small look. “But I don’t mind taking care of this little girl if you guys want to take a walk.”

For some reason, I blushed, while Mike chuckled, uncomfortable. Jonathan was smirking at us. Lucas and Will suddenly showed up, both smiling.

“Were you guys going somewhere?” Lucas asked.

“I guess we were...” Mike mumbled, trying to ignore Joyce’s small smirk.

“Well, they are going to explore. Dinner will be at seven, you know that. So you have plenty of time to say hello to Hawkins, while I get to play with this little one,” Joyce finalized in a cute voice to Mae and walked away to the kitchen. It was her way of saying, *leave, go enjoy yourselves*.

“Well, do you guys want to come?” Mike asked Will and Lucas.

They both said no. Jonathan also refused. So, it was just me and Mike.

“Like usual,” Mike joked as we walked out of the house. He grabbed my hand and intertwined our fingers. I smiled gently. “Where do you want to go?”

I shrugged.

“Let’s just... walk around,” I suggested.

He nodded.

And we did that, in silent, for a while, holding each other's hands, smiling once in a while like teenagers who had stupid crushes on each other. I even giggled once, when we ran across the street before a car could hit us. Mike moved some hair away from my face and kissed me. Then, we went into the woods. We actually managed to find Will's old Castle Byers. I thought it would be more ruined and wrecked than it was.

"Will comes here with Lucas," Mike informed. "Every time they come to visit Joyce, they stop by here. You know that."

I forced a small smile in appreciation. I knew Mike was being kind, but the words *you know that* made me feel like an incompetent. Like I was kind of my fault I didn't know what was going on. I knew he didn't mean it like that. It was just the feeling that haunted me.

"You seem a bit..." Mike didn't finish his sentence, scared that he would say the wrong thing.

"Sometimes this all situation just..." I sighed. "I just... Why am I here?"

He looked at me, confused.

"Why am I still here, Mike? Haven't I made my decision?"

He gulped and looked away instead of answering.

I realized my mistake and looked down, ashamed. Why did I start this conversation with him? I didn't want to hurt him anymore. Stupid El.

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

He shook his head. "It's okay. I mean, ... I... I ask myself that question as well," he confessed. I blinked, surprised. He looked away again. "I mean... Most mornings, when I wake up, before I open my eyes, I just... I just kind of wish that you are still here. Maybe I'm being selfish, but..."

"You're not," I said. He didn't seem convinced. I took two steps closer to him and gently grabbed his unzipped coat. I looked up at



him, trying to get him to meet my gaze. He finally did. "You love me more than I deserve, Mike. And I thank you for that. And I thank you for Mae. And I thank you for being so strong."

He wrapped his arms around me and hid his face against my neck. I hugged him back and took a deep breath, breathing in his scent. Then, he pulled back just a little bit, so his lips could find mine. It was a soft kiss, just a touch of the lips. After pulling back, with our noses still touching, I opened my eyes cautiously. He was staring at me with such tenderness. But there was sadness as well, especially when he said, "I love you, El. Just remember that."

I fought my tears, while I said, "How can you be so okay with this? I mean, anyone... anyone would be... I... It's amazing, really. You're amazing." I said those words with honesty and admiration. Because if I were him, maybe, I wouldn't be reacting like this. I wouldn't be by his side, waiting quietly for the day where I would wake up and forget who he was. "You're one of a kind, Mike Wheeler."

Mike suddenly pushed me away, shaking his head, and took a few steps back, putting some distance between us. I froze in surprise. Mike never pulled me away liked this.

"You think I'm okay with this?" He asked, still shaking his head. "I'm not, El. I... I just told you that every day I wake up, wishing you're still here, instead of where you are supposed to be: with your mom, making sure she doesn't end up marrying that asshole. I'm not okay with this, El. Because I love you and I've loved you for the past five years and, for fuck's sakes, how could I be okay with this? Would you be if you were me? No, right?" I shook my head, tears falling quietly. He approached me and cleaned them. "I'm completely mad at you," he confessed and I looked at him wide-eyed. "Because I want you to one day wake up and tell me, fuck the right thing to do, I choose you. Every day..." He closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said these things. It's just... Some part of me wishes dearly that you would choose me and I try to keep it down, I do, but... I'm sorry."

I just stared at him. I didn't know how to react. I didn't know how to tell him that he had the right to be like this, when his words were hurting me so badly. Deep down, he understood why I had to do it,

yet he didn't want me to. Because he loved me in a way that I didn't know how to love yet. Did I want to learn to feel that love? To give that love?

"I'm sorry, El," he repeated.

I remained silent and hugged him.

I should be the one apologizing. I should say something to let him feel at peace. I had thanked him for being so understandable and strong in this situation, for loving me despite me not deserving it, and now, now that he had confessed what he felt inside, I didn't know how to react. The words refused to leave my mouth.

We were both being selfish, yet I didn't want to confront myself and admit that I was the most out of the two. So, I remained quiet.

---

Lucas and Will were nervously excited throughout dinner. Even I noticed and I spent most of the time immersed in my thoughts, in the conversation that Mike and I had in the woods and how his confession was actually hurting me.

Joyce was at the head of the table and, next to her, on each side, were Jonathan and Will, like it was supposed to be. I was sitting next to Jonathan with Mike by my side and Mae on his lap. Lucas was in front of me and I could see how easily he would show off his nervousness when I looked at him. It was even worse when Joyce stared at them as she patiently waited for their news.

I went to grab the dessert with Jonathan. It was a chocolate cake homemade by Joyce. She was amazing. As we sliced the cake into equal portions and distributed them around the table, I saw how Will started to tense up after a look he shared with Lucas.

"Well, mom--"

"Oh, finally!" Joyce exclaimed. "Please, my son, tell me the big

news.”

Will and Lucas blushed and looked down shyly. I frowned, half-confused, half-expectant.

“Well, you see, Mrs. Byers-“

“Joyce, Lucas, please,” she interrupted with a soft smile.

Lucas coughed.

“Mom,” Will started and I saw his arm move under the table in Lucas’ direction, probably to hold his hand, “Lucas and I... a few months ago... We decided that it was time for us to have kids and...” Everyone stared at them agape. Joyce was covering her opened mouth with her hand. “We started this all crazy and awful process and...” Will and Lucas shared a smile. “We’re going to have a baby.”

No one spoke for a few seconds, staring at him in surprise. Except Mike. He was smiling proudly, like he had known all the time about their decision.

“And... wait... When?” Jonathan asked.

“In a couple of weeks, we believe,” Lucas answered. “We’re just finalizing the process. We had to sign some more papers and then...” He looked at Will happily.

“It’s a little girl,” Will said. “Her name is Laura. She was left at a church when she was only two months old. She is now almost one year old. She is lovely. Wait.” Will stood up and quickly went to his bedroom. Lucas kept staring at us, smiling, and we smiled back. Will came back with a small photograph. Joyce was the first one to see it. “That’s her.”

“Oh my, she’s so beautiful,” Joyce said with tears in her eyes.

She passed the picture to Jonathan and I took a look. Laura was a small, black baby, with curly hair and a big smile.

“She is going to be Laura Maria Byers,” Lucas said. “The second name is my mom’s name and the last name is, well, yours.” He

pointed at Joyce shyly.

Jonathan gave me the picture and I shared it with Mike. Mae looked at it as well and tried to grab it, excitedly.

“Yes, sweetie,” Mike said and brought the picture closer, so Mae could see the little girl. “You two are going to be big friends, aren’t you?”

Mae looked at us with her big brown eyes full of excitement. “Sister?”

Mike and I shared a look before looking away, embarrassed. Everyone at the table laughed.

“Well, how about cousin?” Will suggested. “Do you like that, Mae? And, of course, you two...” He was talking to me and Mike. “Godfathers.”

“I feel betrayed,” Jonathan joked.

Everyone chuckled, except me. They wanted me to be their daughter’s godmother? But I was an awful person... I .... Will knew what I was going to do. Why did he and Lucas decide to name me Laura’s godmother? I wasn’t going to be around... They weren’t going to be around.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled and left the room quickly. I locked myself in Jonathan’s bedroom.

I was ruining Lucas and Will’s happy announcement. But what was new in that? It wasn’t like I wasn’t used to ruin everything around me. It wasn’t like I was going to ruin our lives.

No, I couldn’t call it ruining. I couldn’t think like that. It was about saving. I was going to save my mother. It was the right thing to do. She deserved to know and I had to put my fears aside and tell her what kind of man she was married to.

*“Why would you tell her something that isn’t real?” Brenner accused me after I told him that I was going to confess everything he did to me to my mother.*

*"I'm not lying," I muttered between teeth. "I know what happened."*

*It was the last day of Christmas vacation and I had tried my best to avoid being near him throughout the last two weeks, but not today. He had made some sort of joke about me during dinner. My mother had asked me about boyfriends and Brenner said he daughter was too uptight to find someone. No one was going to want me like that. I was always acting like someone was going to hurt me.*

*Of course, I would act like that when he was around.*

*"You think you know. But you were drunk that night."*

*"Don't you dare play that game," I warned him. "You can lie to my mother and everyone else, acting like you're so amazing, but you don't get to look me in the eyes and tell me that you did not hurt me."*

*Finally, something snapped inside of Brenner. He took a few steps closer to where I was, standing near my dad's old study door. The study Brenner had taken for himself.*

*"Fine, Jane," he said. "What do you want me to say to you?"*

*"The truth," I answered, stepping back. I needed distance between us. My mother was in the kitchen, cleaning something, and I could hear from the stairs a music that she had put on to entertain herself with. "Tell me the truth and don't act like I'm making shit up."*

*"Fine," he repeated and there it was, that smirk, the one that haunted my nightmares, that told me, every single night, that it wasn't going to be pleasant, full of sweet dreams night. It was going to make me wake up in the middle of the night crying and calling for my dad. I needed my dad more than anything. Brenner spoke, "You were drunk. I waited for you. What happened in your bedroom? You didn't make it up." He took another step closer and I moved away, stepping outside the room. He touched the door and, before closing it in my face, he said, "Keep bringing that up and I'm going to assume you want to relive it."*

*I heard a knock on the door and just ignored it. But it kept on coming, making an annoying noise against the door's wood. I sighed through my tears and finally stood up from the bed and went to open*

it. It was Will. He looked worried. I turned around and went back to where I had been sitting. He closed the door behind him and joined me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everything,” I answered. “I’m a bad person, Will. I can’t be your daughter’s godmother. Jesus, I can’t even be my own daughter’s mother. Or Mike’s wife. Or your best friend. I can’t do it. Because I’m going to change all this, Will. Why did you still pick me as her godmother, why? You know I’m going to-“ I closed my mouth and sobbed.

Will touched my back, comforting me like I deserved that. I was such a mess. I didn’t know what to pick. That was why I was still here. I was torn between doing the right thing and being selfish.

“It was Lucas,” he confessed. I looked up at him, shocked. “He was the one that insisted on you being the godmother. I couldn’t just deny his wish since I had to explain why I was doing it... and, honestly, El, of course I want you to be my daughter’s godmother. We made that promise to each other when you got pregnant with Mae and asked me to be her godfather. It doesn’t matter that... that you won’t be around to see her and maybe, in this other future, you won’t be her godmother... Or, you know, maybe you will. Because you’ll still be in my life. We will always be in each other’s life.”

I just blinked through my tears.

I didn’t have the guts to explain to him that maybe, just maybe, his daughter wouldn’t be here as well since, when it was supposed to happen, when they were supposed to get together for real, I wouldn’t tell him to give Lucas a chance. I would probably tell him that he was right to get suspect of Lucas’ “Oh let’s be together” speech because that was the kind of person I was. And, if he didn’t give Lucas a chance, like he deserved, they wouldn’t be here right now, having a kid together.

“Mike is mad at me,” I suddenly confessed. “Because of my decision. Are you?”

Will didn't know how to reply for a while. I sighed and hid my face behind my hands. What was I supposed to do?

"I honestly don't know, El. But I understand Mike." He paused. "Why... Why don't you two just enjoy the vacation here? I mean, we're back home, El. My mom is turning... God, so old. She's going to be a grandma and she's flipping about it, I just know it."

"And probably telling Jonathan that he needs to step up his game as well because she wants more grandchildren," I added and we both chuckled. I cleaned my tears and controlled the quiet sobs that tended to follow them. "Yeah... Okay... Okay, Will."

"Better?"

"Yes," I said. Honestly, I didn't even know if I was telling the truth or not.

He smiled at me.

"Good, El." And then he stood up. "Now, let's enjoy the fact that I'm going to be a dad. And, oh God, Lucas is going to be a dad."

I laughed, still a bit with teary eyes, and stood up.

In the dining-room, everyone was talking about Laura. Lucas was telling the story about how he and Will found out about her and decided she was the one they wanted as a daughter, when we walked in and it went quiet. They stared at me, concerned. Not Mike, who had his chin on our daughter's head and was staring at the table.

I sat down next to him and, noticing Mae's arms stretching in my direction, I grabbed her and put her on my lap. He gave me a side glance. "There's still cake for you," he muttered.

"Thanks," I replied hesitantly.

"Well, everything is okay now," Will announced. "Let's all think about the fact that his man –" And he pointed at himself – "yes, mom, I'm a big boy now... Well, anyways, I..."

"Don't you dare to finish that sentence," Lucas interrupted him.

Will pretended to be shocked and Lucas leaned over to kiss his cheek.

They were happy. Joyce was happy and Jonathan had already taken out his camera to take pictures of this important moment. I looked at Mike who was playing around with the small piece of chocolate that he had yet eaten. Timidly, my hand found its way to his leg. He looked at me, confused. My hand moved up and grabbed his hand, taking out the fork he had been holding. His fingers intertwined with mine. I smiled. He smiled back.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you for reading, guys, and if there are any grammar mistakes, I apologize.

I don't know if you saw it, but I've finally established the number of chapters that my story will have. Yes, it's coming to an end... I hope you've enjoyed it so far and will like the following chapters. Please, tell me what you think.



## 15. The birthday party

Mae was sleeping soundly. The little noises she was letting out, which seemed almost like snores, made me smile. Mike was in the bathroom, being the last one to take a shower. Everyone had already gone to bed. Jonathan was sleeping on the sofa, which opened out into a small bed. He said he didn't mind after I asked him if it was really okay for us to take his bedroom. He said it would be wrong if he let us three sleep in the living-room's small bed while he had a gigantic bed.

"Anyways, it has always been like this, El, don't you worry now," he finished with a smile.

Mae's chest went up and down slowly, according to her breathing. My finger was cautiously rubbing her small cheek until I decided to move down to caress her little hand. Unconsciously, she gripped two of my fingers and pulled them closer to her, like they were her small teddy bear. I smiled softly.

"Hey."

I looked behind my shoulder and saw Lucas standing outside the bedroom. Mike had left the door half-opened.

"Hey."

"Are you okay?" Lucas asked. I nodded. He pressed his lips together, and nodded back. "Well, good night, then."

"G'night," I said back and he disappeared. A few seconds later, I heard a door closed.

I laid down again comfortably, gazing once again at Mae. She moved a bit and I felt her little fingers squeezing mine. Carefully, I took my other arm, which had been stuck under my body, and I laid it over her pillow, touching her soft hair. Everything about her was so soft. Everything about her smelled so good. Her little freckles made me want to kiss her cute, little face. Her small nose, which was just like mine, was right in front of me, begging to be squeezed.

Looking at her made me feel at peace. And I could now, with no trouble, feel how it was true; how Mike and I had made her. I brought to life another human being and she was the most adorable thing I had ever seen.

I heard a door opening and then steps getting closer. Mike entered the room, closing the bedroom's door behind him. I only saw him after he walked around the bed, to where his empty side was awaiting him. He took off his flip-flops before carefully moving the sheets and laying on the bed. Mae let go of my fingers and moved a bit away from me, turning her head to her father. Mike touched her small tummy.

Mike and I stared at each other.

"I'm sorry," he ended up saying. "For telling you I was mad at you."

I shook my head softly.

"No need for that," I said. "I mean, you have the right to be mad."

He sighed and rose his hand to touch Mae's soft cheekbone. Our daughter took a deep breath in her sleep. We stared at her in silence.

"I don't know what to do," I confessed. "I want to do the right thing, I don't want my mother to be married to him... But... I don't want *her*-" and I nodded at Mae -"to stop existing. I... I don't."

Mike didn't say anything at first. He just caressed our daughter's cheek, while I played gently with her hair.

"What if you told her now?" He asked. "I mean, you would still go back and all, but... I don't know..."

"She wouldn't believe me, Mike," I said. "If I went back, met you, did all this all over again and then show up at her door, telling her the man she is married to-" I stopped myself from saying it and shook my head - "she wouldn't believe me. Because I'm the daughter who hasn't spoken to her in years and he is her loving husband."

"At least, there would be a doubt."

“We still wouldn’t talk,” I argued. “And she still wouldn’t be in my life, or Mae’s... I mean, I haven’t met your parents, but I’m pretty sure they are amazing...” Mike frowned. “Our daughter has already lost one of her grandfathers... Why does she have to grow up without knowing her grandmother as well? I mean, she is alive. I know my mom is in this town, alive. So...” I went quiet.

“What is the point of this talk, El?” Mike asked, confused. “What do you want to do, then? I mean, now you’re saying you want your mother to be in Mae’s life... But you don’t want her married to Brenner. How are you supposed to change that without changing us? I mean, ...” Mike suddenly changed his position, laying on his back. Mae’s body followed him and she moved to her side, her tiny hand reaching out for Mike’s arm. “You said it yourself, if you go back and meet me, you won’t be able to tell her the truth about that asshole. If you go and change me, she won’t marry Brenner. But Mae won’t exist, so... why talk about her meeting her grandma?” He sighed. “What’s the point of me arguing with you about this?”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “This is something I have to choose myself and I can’t ask you to be that selfless.”

“It’s not being selfless, El. It’s selfish, really.” He looked at me. “I don’t want to lose our daughter. Or you. That’s my opinion on this. However, whatever you decide to do, I’ve told you, I’ll accept it.”

“Why?”

“I love you.” His answer was simple and honest, just like he was.

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Joyce was turning fifty, so of course there had to be a huge birthday party to which she was half-excited, half-sad since it was a reminder that she had already lived through five decades. It was a lot.

“Well, mom, it could be worse,” Jonathan said. “You could be, you

know, cray cray with a lot of pigeons,” he joked and then laughed when his mother hit his shoulder playful

“I wouldn’t mind having a lot of pigeons,” Joyce commented. Her son stared at her, open-mouthed, and she laughed. “What? They are cute. And they would keep me company while you two are living in the big city.”

Right now, I was helping Will preparing a small table of snacks in the backyard. Jonathan and Lucas would be responsible for the barbecue and Mike had gone shopping for extra drinks. He had taken Mae with him since she loved sightseeing in Hawkins, even if it was just the local supermarket.

Will approached the table with two bowls of chips. I took one out of his hands and placed it on one of the table’s ends.

“Everything’s okay with you and Mike?” Will asked, putting down the other bowl. “I noticed some change this morning, but...” He shrugged and didn’t finish his sentence.

“I think it is okay. I mean, as okay as it can be. Tomorrow we’re going to take Mae to visit my dad’s grave.”

“You do well.” Will smiled softly. Then, he was called by his mother to come and check something out. I watched them entering the house. Jonathan and Lucas were sharing a beer by the old barbecue pit that Joyce owned. My dad had cooked there, in so many summers, while Will and I played around or rode our bikes. Mom and Joyce used to laugh together during their small chats and Jonathan took photos of everyone and everything. I had so many albums of those days. Were they with me, or had they been forgotten at my mom’s house? At my old home...

Mike and Mae returned shortly after. Jonathan and Lucas started the fire and Will brought a huge plate of meat outside. After letting Will to place it by the barbecue pit, Lucas wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him to a quick embrace. Will blushed and rolled his eyes at his boyfriend before walking away and joining Mike near his old shed. I didn’t know what they were doing in there. They were just staring at the inside while talking. I was sitting next to Joyce, who

had Mae on her lap and was feeding her one chip at the time. My daughter's mouth was shiny because of the chips' salt and her hands were all wet because she honestly didn't know how to eat properly.

"Hawkins doesn't change much, does it?" Joyce asked out of the blue.

I looked at her, confused, and then nodded, agreeing. Joyce showed me a small, sweet smile

"Your dad would be proud of you," she said. I looked down at my feet, which were playing around with old, yellow leaves that had fallen from the trees. "You know that, right, El?"

I shrugged.

"Oh honey, don't do that." Joyce shook her head and put Mae on the floor. "Go see your daddy, go," she said gently while carefully pushing Mae away from us.

Mae giggled, eager, and then walked away in small hops to the old shed, where she met Mike, who picked her up. Joyce pulled her chair closer to mine and took my hand into hers.

"So, dear, what's going on?"

I tried to avoid her gaze, like that could avoid the conversation we were about to have, but she just grabbed my chin and turned my head to her. Joyce gave me a comforting smile, like the one she had shown me a few days after my dad's death, when she had told me that everything was going to be okay. Dad would be watching over me.

"I miss my mom," I confessed the one thing I could confess.

Joyce understood.

"How long has it been since you two talked?"

I shrugged. "Since the wedding, I suppose... Somewhere around then..."

Joyce squeezed my hand.

“It’s complicated, sweetie, I know... Since Hopper... Well, it has been tough. I know it has. But you and your mom only had each other and... you can still have each other,” she said in a kind tone of voice. “Why don’t you try to make it up?”

“She’s still married to him,” I said with a scowl.

Joyce blinked. “Martin? Well,... El, you never... I always thought you two had disagree over the fact... I don’t know, that Terry was moving on too soon, or that you had Mike and your mother didn’t approve... At least, that what it seemed like that day, at her wedding.”

Joyce had gone to the wedding as well. How could my mother have invited her to her wedding? It was Joyce, dad’s best friend since childhood.

“Well, yes, I don’t like him,” I admitted.

“Why?” She asked.

I remained quiet, because how could I say it to Joyce? She would see me in a different way. She would pity me over something that happened seven years ago. I felt pity back then. Self-pity, mostly, because no one knew. Then, I felt Will’s, when I told him. and I felt Samantha’s when, during a drunk night, I confessed to her my most awful secret. I couldn’t let Joyce pity me. Not now. Not seven years later.

“Honey, you can talk to me,” she added, concerned.

“This isn’t the place nor the time to talk about that, Joyce. It’s your birthday,” I said with a forced smile. “Tomorrow?”

She seemed hesitant to let the subject go, but finally nodded.

Shortly after, Luca and Jonathan announced that lunch was ready.

We sat around the table, drinking something that Lucas called

‘sangria’. I believed it was a Brazilian drink with wine, juice and cut fruit. It was sweet. I liked it. Mae wanted to try it, of course, used to be able to drink from everyone’s glass, but today we had to stop her. Until, of course, Joyce said to let her try a bit.

“You’ll see that she takes one sip and won’t want it anymore.”

So, Mike helped Mae take a sip of the drink. She made a repulsed face, which made us laugh, and then turned to her orange juice.

For dessert, there was a birthday cake, of course, and Will and Jonathan literally lighted up 50 candles, which made Joyce complain a lot.

“I can’t blow them all! Are you all crazy?”

And we laughed.

Then, it was time for gifts. And Joyce was shocked to see she had so many. Will and Lucas had brought her three, Jonathan two, and Mike and I another two. She was clearly happy, unwrapping them and finding out the things she was getting. Mike and I and bought her a dark brown jacket, which I just knew she would love, and a book. Joyce learned how to love books after both her sons were living their lives, outside Hawkins, and she had to find something to do instead of cleaning their usual mess and worrying about them (Jonathan and Will had always been that type of people who just loved to explore. And I knew that because I was just like them). So, she turned to books and they were her haven now. She loved to read about everything.

“Thank you all so much,” she said, wrapping her newest red and black scarf around her neck. Jonathan had given her that one, along with an album he put together with dozens of old pictures. There was some of me and Will. The one that caught my attention was one Jonathan took when we were ten years old. We were standing in front of the Castle Byers, with huge smiles on our faces, and holding our bikes. My bike had a small basket in front of it with HOPPER written in it in black marker pen. There was a sheriff’s hat as well. My dad had laughed so hard when he saw what I did to the basket that he and mom had bought. Of course, mom hadn’t been very

happy.

We spent the rest of the afternoon joking around and playing some board games. At some point, Lucas convinced us all to play soccer, which was a terrible idea since he was the only one that could actually be considered good in sports.

“I swear to God we’ll have a dozen kids and I’ll make them be the greatest soccer team there is,” Lucas said to Will, who threw his head back and laughed really hard. “I’m serious!”

“Sure thing, Lucas,” Will snickered and walked up to me, holding the ball in his hands. He gave it to me and I frowned. “Come on, you start this round.”

I sighed.

“Fine.”

I threw the ball too far and it ended up bouncing over the old shed’s roof and fall over the other side. Mike chuckled, while Lucas let out an “Oh, maaaaan!”.

“I think that was a sign to stop this,” Jonathan said, looking at us hopeful. Once Will and I agreed, he sighed in relief.

I joined Joyce, who was still sitting by the table with Mae on her lap. Mae had two old small cars, which used to belong to Will and Jonathan, and was playing with them on top of the table.

“Vrruuuum!” She clashed both cars together and Joyce laughed. Mae looked up at her and showed her tiny teeth, happy that her fake destruction was making Joyce laugh. “Vrum vrum?”

“Vrum vrum,” Joyce said very serious and Mae let out a happy screech and made the cars crash again.

While we chuckled at the scene, Mike approached us and sat down next to me. He put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer. Joyce smiled at us.

“How’s life been treating you two?”



Mike and I glanced at each other. Well, what a complicated question to answer, really. So, we snorted and then, it turned into a chuckle. Next thing we knew we were laughing loudly. Joyce was looking at us with a confused, yet amused smile.

We never got to answer her question since Lucas came up with a new game for us to play: hide-and-seek.

“Honestly, Lucas,” Will said. “How old are you?”

“Mae can play as well!”

So, of course, we played for an entire hour.

For dinner, we ordered pizzas and sat around the living-room watching films. Mae fell asleep on Wil’s lap throughout an action film. I was actually glad since it turned out a bit too violent at the end.

Joyce was the one to end the party around eleven pm, telling everyone to go to bed. Tomorrow was another day and we needed our beauty sleeps.

“Oh, geez, thanks, mom,” Will mumbled in a tired voice while he passed a sleeping Mae to Mike’s arms. He took her to Jonathan’s bedroom.

Lucas called shotgun for the bathroom and we rolled our eyes as he almost leaped down the corridor. I helped Joyce put the pizza’s boxes in the garbage and Will washed the glasses.

We took turns going to the bathroom, as there was only one for currently six people. I was awaiting my turn in the bedroom when Mike knocked on the door and told me I could go.

“Have you gone yet?”

“I’ll go next,” he said with a smile.

As I passed by him, I stopped and stood on tiptoes to give him a quick peck on the lips. He tried to hold it longer but I pulled back and walked to the bathroom.

I washed my face and my teeth slowly. I took the time to take a good look at myself in the mirror. My hair was tied in a loose ponytail and, despite having dark circles under my eyes, I felt happy and relaxed. It had been a good day. And Joyce had been happy, always smiling and laughing at our stupid games. That was the most important thing.

I heard the door opening and saw Mike walking in through the mirror. He gave me a small smirk and closed the door behind him.

“What is it?” I asked with my mouth full of toothpaste.

He shrugged.

“Nothing. Just felt like coming here.”

I frowned. “What for?”

He shrugged once more.

“I wanted to look at you.”

My reaction was to blush and look down at the washbasin. He chuckled and then moved away from the door and towards me. I felt his arms around my waist and his lips on my neck.

“Honestly, Mike,” I sighed happily as his lips met my skin once again.

I finished washing my teeth and threw the last spit of water out before grabbing a towel and cleaning my mouth. I took a step away from Mike’s arms and let him wash his face and teeth.

Instead of going to the bedroom, I stood near the door, staring at him. Mike noticed and chuckled, thinking it was some kind of playful revenge. But, actually, I just felt like looking at him as well. Because sometimes I didn’t look at him as much as he deserved. Or as much as I wished I did. I was always wrapped in my own thoughts, problems and indecisions that I forgot to look at him. And, honestly, he was great to look at.

Mike was home, I once concluded. That was why I never got to

stop my mother from marrying Brenner. He gave me a home when mine got completely destroyed. He taught me how to love when I didn't know how to do it. He stood by my side, even though I was sure I didn't deserve his support. At least, not now. Maybe other-future El did. Maybe she was worth of him.

Maybe I could be.

I leaned against the bathroom's door, watching as Mike grabbed his toothbrush and spread a bit of toothpaste on it.

As he washed his teeth, I went back to these previous months, to how scared and confused I was when I first woke up here, in a flat I didn't know and with a new family; to when Mike didn't think I was crazy and believed in my insane, yet truthful story; to when I started to see Mae as my daughter and smiling at the life I had; to when Mike and I made love and I just knew how easily it could be to fall into this life. Since my dad's death that I didn't look at anyone for comfort, love or support. I had those things from my friends, yet I never asked for them. I even tried to push them away at some point. But that didn't happen with Mike and, despite not having any memory of how we met and how we fell in love, I just knew that he had been different. He was still different.

"I can see it now," I said, leaning against the bathroom's door.

Mike, who was brushing his teeth, gave me a short, confused look. "What?"

"Why I fell in love with you."

He blinked, surprised at my sudden confession, with the toothbrush still inside his mouth. Then, he leaned down and spit out the toothpaste. He opened the tap and, with his hand, brought water to his mouth. I waited quietly as he cleaned himself with the towel I had used.

Leaving his toothbrush next to mine in the basin, he turned around and closed the small distance between us. He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me to a soft, gentle kiss. I smiled against his lips.

He had understood my words.

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I asked Mike to stay with Mae in the car for a few minutes and then come and join me in the graveyard. I just needed a moment alone with my dad. Whether it was to talk, or just stare at his name, it was something I was still debating while I read his name over and over again in the grey, well taken grave. There were yellow flowers in front of it and I had brought some daisies, which were now lying next to them. I was sure it was Joyce that kept his grave clean and brought him fresh flowers every week. My mom was too busy being a new wife, having a new life with her new husband.

“She still cares,” I said out loud. “Doesn’t she, Dad? I mean, she has... You were her husband...But I’m her daughter and here we are...” I sat down in front of his grave and pulled my legs closer, wrapping my arms around them. “What am I supposed to do, Dad? I thought I had figure it out already... I thought I had made my choice: mom. I was going to pick mom. And I need to pick mom, right?”

Of course, there was no answer. I sighed.

“It’s the right thing to do. Even for me. I can’t-“ I made a face, closing my eyes, and shook my head –“I can’t just live my life knowing that they... they are together.”

I heard something behind me. Mike was approaching the grave with a quiet Mae in his arms. She was quite aware of what was going on, of where she was, and how she must remain silent to respect the others who were here visiting people.

Mike sat down next to me and put Mae on my lap. I held her closely. She touched my face and caressed it, looking up at me with sad eyes.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” I said. “We don’t need to be sad here. We’re

visiting grandpa.”

“Grandpa Hop, remember?” Mike asked softly.

Mae nodded and pointed at the name. “Grandpa Hop,” she repeated.

“He was amazing and he would have loved you so much, Mae,” I told her. She smiled at me, showing off all her tiny teeth, happy to hear about her grandpa. “You would have loved him too, wouldn’t you?”

She nodded happily and pointed at the grave again. “Grandpa Hop. Grandpa Hop.”

Mike chuckled kindly and touched her soft black hair. She looked at her dad, thrilled, and stretched her arms to him. I let her go and Mike grabbed her, holding her up on his lap. She had her tiny hands on his face and was giggling. Mike tried to move them away to kiss her nose, but she pressed her hands strongly, keeping him away, while letting out small giggles. I smiled at them.

*“If I need to shoot someone, just let me know,” Dad informed me while I retouched my hair in front of the mirror’s hall. I had a date tonight, with a boy from my English class. Dad had wanted to say no, but mom talked him into letting do this. Yes, I was only thirteen, but I had to start living at some point.*

*I snorted. “Dad, please, we’re just going to the movies. Besides, Will and Jennifer will be there as well. Don’t you worry.”*

*He sighed.*

*“You’re growing up too fast. Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me I have grandkids.”*

*I made a face. “Oh, gross. No, Dad. No grandkids for many years.”*

But he would have loved Mae so much. And Mike. He would have taken one look at Mike and nodded approvingly. And, after Mike left, he would turn to me and say, *yes, El, that boy is good for you.* I just knew he would.

I looked down at Mae, who was now staring quietly at my dad's grave. At her grandpa's grave.

"So, Mae, what do you want to see next?" I suddenly asked. She looked up at me and smiled. "Do you want to see mommy's old school? Or the library? Oh, do you want to go visit Mr. Clarke? I'm pretty sure we'll find him somewhere around here..."

Mae giggled, thrilled, and clapped her tiny hands. I heard Mike chuckle once more. We had already spent the entire morning wandering around Hawkins, showing Mae the old arcade, the cafés I used to go with Will and the police station where my dad used to work. Of course, she had already seen all of this, but she revisited every place with such an excitement like it was the first time. Then, we had lunch in Benny's restaurant.

"Where do you want to go, Mae?" Mike leaned over, smiling at our daughter. "Do you want to go visit mommy's old school?"

"Or," I started excitedly, "maybe we can go see mommy's *old house*?" Mike looked up at me and blinked. "What do you say, Mae?" I asked in an exciting tone of voice. "Do you want to see mommy's old bedroom? Or grandpa's old study? He had a hugeeee study, filled with bookshelves!"

"El," Mike called, scared.

But Mae was clapping her hands, excited, and making happy noises. So, I stood up, taking her with me. Mike followed us, giving me uncertain glances.

I passed Mae to Mike and then put my hand inside his jeans' front pocket. He stared at me, asking me a silent question with his eyes, but I just smiled and took out the car keys. Jonathan had lent us his truck for the day.

I walked around the truck and got into the driver's seat. Mike took the passenger seat with Mae on his lap. He put the seatbelt on, just like I did.

As I started the car, he asked me, "El, are you sure about this?"

I smiled at him.

“Yes.”

I knew what I had to do.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

I hope you enjoyed it! Please tell me what you think.

## 16. The decision

*The moving wheels of his bike gave him away. He was approaching me slowly, as if he were afraid that a loud noise would scare me away like a frightened, helpless animal.*

*He came to sit down next to me. There was a light breeze in the air. It was warm and it infiltrated my black clothing.*

*Next to me, Will cleared his throat. He was smaller than me, despite being three months older. Until recently, I had wondered if it was I that grew up too fast, or if it was Will's growing that was too slow. Of course, until recently, I had nothing better to wonder about. Now I couldn't even allow myself to think.*

*"El, everyone's looking for you again," Will finally spoke.*

*I just stared ahead at the grey, rectangular stone that had my dad's name engraved on it, along with his birthday and the date of his death. Beloved husband and father, it also said. He was much more than just 'beloved'. But, of course, you couldn't write that down on a gravestone.*

*"El," Will called again and I felt his stare on me. But I just didn't know how to reply. If I tried to talk, I would cry. If I tried to feel, I would cry. If I tried to do anything, I would cry. My dad was gone and I was only fourteen. What was I supposed to do without him? Who was supposed to cook with me in those nights that mom was too tired to do it? Who was supposed to take me hiking and camping? Who would teach me how to defend myself from assholes? Who would tell me that it was okay to be human and to make mistakes?*

*"Let's go home, please," Will asked and touched my hand gently, pulling me to him.*

*I didn't react, but, somehow, he took it as if I had accepted his request and helped me stand up. He took me home in his bike.*

*"Spending your days there won't bring him back, Jane." Those were the first words my mother threw at me when I walked in the house. I knew she was in pain as well. I knew she had just lost her husband. But I ignored*



*her and ran to my bedroom. I locked myself in there and didn't leave for hours.*

My house was the biggest in the street, a gift from the mayor after my dad was promoted to sheriff. He hadn't wanted to accept it, but my mom and I talked him into it. It was a beautiful house, with a huge garden and well taken flower beds. I parked the car right in front of it. I could see the second-floor windows opened. Back then, I knew they belonged to my mom and dad's bedroom and one of the bathrooms. Well, now it was mom and Brenner's bedroom and probably the only used bathroom in the entire house. I cringed my nose and closed my eyes.

"El, we don't have to," Mike said.

I looked at him. Mae was staring at the house with her mouth opened in a small 'o'. It was one of the biggest houses she had seen and she was having mixed feelings about it, as far as I could see. She was interested in seeing it, but she was also afraid. It was too big.

"I want to," I replied and got out of the car.

I went around it and caught Mike as he was in the middle of getting out as well. I grabbed Mae. He closed the car's door and stared at me.

"El, please," he said.

"She needs to know her granddaughter," I stated and walked up the garden and into the porch. I rang the doorbell three times.

When no one showed up, I rang two more times. Mike had taken his place next to me and touched my back, as to give me strength and support. But I didn't need those things. I knew what I wanted to do.

Finally, the door opened.

My mom was a tall woman, with brown hair and green eyes. She was older than I remembered, with wrinkles on her forehead and around her mouth. She blinked, confused.

"Hi, mom," I said dryly and moved my arms to handle Mae's weight better. "This is Mae. She's your granddaughter and she's-" I shut up

when I saw him, Martin Brenner, standing by the kitchen's open door, holding a cup of coffee. He was taller than my mother, with white hair and evil eyes. I could feel my body tremble and Mike's hand on my back stroke me, remembering me that I wasn't alone. I took a deep breath. "She's here to see my old house, so, if you excuse me..."

I passed over my mother, who was static with no kind of reaction at all, and walked up the stairs fast. My bedroom was the last door of the corridor, right next to my dad's old study.

"Do you wanna see mommy's old bedroom?" I asked Mae in a sweet tone of voice. She gave me a scared smile.

I walked down the entire corridor and, finally, noticed how my old bedroom's door was painted in another colour. It used to be a light yellow and now it was white.

I opened it and stopped still.

My old bedroom used to have light blue walls, a huge bed by the window, a black, with two mirrors, wardrobe and a desk with shelves on top of it, where I used to keep my school books. The walls used to be covered in photographs and posters.

What I was seeing right now wasn't my bedroom.

This was a guest room, with the same bed I used to have, but different sheets and a beige quilt on top of it. The walls were white. There was no desk, and the wardrobe was different, smaller and made of wood. My old carpet, which used to be green, was now also beige, matching the bed. There were no pictures on the wall, no memories of me in it.

I heard steps and saw Mike standing next to me. He looked inside and frowned, confused. So, he had met my old bedroom and could now see it was different.

I turned around. My mother was near the stairs, looking at us with an expressionless face. I gave her a death stare before walking to my dad's old study and opening it.

My dad's study used to have bookshelves covering almost every wall, except the one where his desk stood. There he had pictures of our family. I remembered most of them were of me throughout the years.

*"Have you seen Jane?" I heard my mom ask my dad.*

*He made a confused noise. I tried to control my giggles.*

*"No, I have not."*

*My mom sighed, annoyed. "That girl..." And she walked out of the study.*

*My dad's chair moved and his head appeared under the desk. I smiled at him, showing off my two missing front teeth. He chuckled.*

*"You need to go take a shower sooner or later, Jane."*

*"No!"*

This wasn't my dad's old study. The desk was in a different place and the wood was darker. There were only two bookshelves and no pictures on the walls, only some kind of written rewards given to Brenner.

My heart was beating fast. I frowned. What did they do to my dad's house? To my bedroom and his study?

"Mommy," Mae called, frightened. "Mommy."

Out of the blue, Mike took her from my arms. I had been squeezing her too hard.

I turned to my mother, who had taken a few steps closer and was now near her bedroom's door. Brenner was nowhere to be seen.

I was shaking. I closed my hands into strong grips, trying to control myself. I wouldn't cry in front of her. I wouldn't scream in front of Mae.

"El," Mike called softly.

"Get out of here." I looked at him. "Please. I need to talk to my

mom.”

Hesitantly, Mike nodded. He held Mae closer to his chest and passed my mother without a second glance, despite my mother watching him the entire time.

After he was gone, she looked back at me.

“You erase us,” I said angrily.

My mother blinked.

“What?”

“You erase us from your life.”

She didn’t say anything at first, just looked at me shocked. And then, she frowned in an angry expression.

“You walked away,” she accused me. “You refused to let me in for years and then, when I got to be happy, you walked away with-“

“Don’t you dare,” I interrupted her and took a step closer. “Don’t you dare telling me it was my fault. I lost my dad.”

“And I lost my husband. We’ve had this argument so many times, Jane.”

“Eleven,” I corrected.

She snorted.

“You’re a grown woman and still want to be called by a nickname?” She shook her head. “You even have-” She interrupted herself and stared at me cynically. “Aren’t you a bit too young to be a mother?”

My mouth fell wide-opened and, strangely, I felt betrayed more than anything. It wasn’t just anger that bubbled inside of me, it was a strike of deep sadness and shock that my mom could say that. As if she hadn’t had me at the age of twenty-two. As if she even had any authority to judge me.

“How dare you?”

My mother let out a sort of snort, a bit too cynical.

“I know you’ve forgotten, but I’m still your mother.”

I rolled my eyes.

“At this point-“

“Oh, don’t you dare now say that,” she interrupted furious. “I carried you for nine months, I gave birth to you, I raised you for years and you-“ She pointed at me –“you always acted like your dad was the hero. And when I finally decided to have some happiness in my life after he was gone, what did you do? You barely came home. And, when you did, you acted angrily towards me and Martin, who has never done anything wrong to you.”

My reaction was to laugh really loud. I didn’t have those five-second moment where I stood here, staring at her, shocked. No, I just laughed. Because that had been the most incorrect thing my mother had ever said and she didn’t even realize it.

“Stop laughing,” she demanded in a weak tone of voice, like she was confused with my reaction. Maybe she had expected more anger, more sadness, more shouting. But not laugh. Even I didn’t expect it, but it just poured out of my mouth and I couldn’t control it. “Jane Hopper, stop-“

“Oh, shut up,” I said, regaining control. “Never did anything wrong? Honestly?”

“Well, yes. Unlike your boyfriend, who disrespected him and me, at our wedding,” she accused.

I clutched my fists. If I were to be completely honest, I didn’t remember how exactly I felt about my mother before Mike told me about the wedding. I didn’t know if I had actually loved her. I did. I had to. I just couldn’t remember it.

“He is one of the kindest and-“

“So is Martin,” she interrupted. “And you never gave him a chance, Jane.” She shook her head and, before I could say anything else, she added, “your father would have wanted you to have a good male example in your life. He would have been happy if you had someone you could trust like you trusted him. He would-“

“He would put Brenner in jail!” I exclaimed loudly. There was some noise coming from downstairs. Someone clearly heard me talking and started climbing the stairs.

“What are you talking about?” My mother asked with an offended expression.

Brenner showed up. He stood still, staring at me. My mother frowned at him. but his eyes were on me. He was warning me not to talk. But I couldn't. I couldn't stay quiet... .Could I?

“Jane, honestly, you say such nonsense,” my mother spoke, crossing her arms.

I opened my mouth to answer, but my eyes were stuck on Brenner and how he didn't stop staring at me. He knew what I had wanted to say. He came to stop me. It had been real, what he did to me. It was still real and it had broken me and my mother apart. We couldn't even stand in the same room. We didn't talk. All because of him.

“That boy... It was him,” my mother added. “You went away and got... mesmerised by some random-“

And that was when I lost it.

“Mike is the best thing to have ever happened to me,” I snapped. My eyes moved from my mother to Brenner and back to her. “Not like him.”

“Stop insinuating things that aren't true, Jane. I honestly-“

“He raped me!” I shouted. And, suddenly, I felt lighter.

My mother's eyes went wide-opened and I saw fear in Brenner's facial expression.

“W-what are-“

“Terry, this is nonsense,” Brenner talked. But I saw the hesitation in my mother’s eyes.

“Is it?” I said. “So, all the nights I woke up screaming because of nightmares about you didn’t happen? All the times I spent hours in the shower trying to get rid of your filthy touch and the damn-“ I controlled myself.” So, it didn’t happen? I was drunk and made it up? Is that what you’re going to say to my mother after I leave?” I asked. My mother’s eyes were on her husband, trying to figure out what was truth or not. “Drunk people... Drunk people can’t make THAT SHIT UP. And you tried, you tried so hard to make ME believe that what happened wasn’t true. But it was. And here we are now, facing the truth all together.”

Both of them stared at me, wide-opened. I turned to my mother.

“I spent years trying to keep it away from you because I didn’t want you to hurt. I didn’t want you to know that the man you loved...” I sniffed and shook my head. “I didn’t want you to know that he had hurt me, because I wanted you to be happy. I did, Mom. Honestly. It hurt that you had brought him into our home, into dad’s home, but...” I took a deep breath and swallowed my tears. “And then, you two got married and... And I panicked and it was *Mike* who was there for me. He gave me strength and a new home. And you know what, Mom? That actually makes me sad, that I had to get a new home. Because it meant that my old home was ruined for me.” One tear escaped from my eyes. “And it was ruined because you loved a bad man. And that scarred me for life. I didn’t want to be you. I didn’t want to wake up one day and realize that the man I loved was bad.”

I cleaned the tear that had fallen and shook my head one more time. I closed my eyes for one second, just to regain control, and then looked back at both of them. Brenner was furious, of course, but he wouldn’t talk. He wouldn’t give it away that I was telling the truth. Because he had a good life and a good wife.

I sniffed again.

“But you know what now?” I stepped closer to my mother. Her eyes followed me, scared and uncertain. “I don’t care anymore, Mom. I don’t care that you now will wake up every day for the rest of your life and know... just know that you’ve loved a man that was bad. And me? I will never have to face that. Because I love a good man. And I have a daughter who will never have to face what I faced. And I’ll protect her. I’m sorry you couldn’t have met her properly. I’m sorry that you won’t ever meet her properly.”

I averted my eyes to Brenner and managed to smile.

“I hope you two are happy together.”

I went over my mother and then passed by Brenner without a second look. I climbed down the stairs and left the house. Mike was waiting by the car, with Mae on his arms. That was when I started to run and cry.

Mike took me into a hug. Mae touched my hair and called out, “mommy, mommy!”, scared. I looked at her and smiled softly.

“I’m okay, sweetie.”

“Are you sure?” Mike looked worried.

I nodded between the tears.

“Yes.”

I didn’t have to look back to know that my mother came to the door and watched us leave. I didn’t have to see the look on her face to know that I had just ruined her marriage. Because the uncertainty was there. The doubt. The thing that would killed her inside, despite Brenner denying it. Oh, he would deny it. But my mother would never know for sure who was telling the truth or not.

---



“What are you going to do?”

I didn't have an answer for Mike. I just shrugged and held Mae closer to me. She was sleeping peacefully, like Mike and I should be doing. It was two in the morning. We had come home and everyone was around, having a great time, eating snacks and talking, so we joined them. I put up a happy face and got into the mood. Of course, Will had noticed something was off. And Joyce did too. She tried to talk to me once, when she caught me alone in the kitchen, but I just hugged her and said, “Thank you for being a great mom.”

“El,” Mike called.

I sighed.

“I don't know,” I replied honestly.

I felt that this was it. Finally, I was going back to where I belonged, to my twenty-year-old life, drunk at a party, probably about to meet Mike. I had to choose. What did I want to do? Did I want to face this again? Did I want to tell my mother, after years of not talking to each other, what kind of man she was married to, or did I want to confess everything right away?

I wouldn't ask myself if I wanted to meet Mike, because I knew I did.

“Try to sleep,” I told him and leaned over to kiss his forehead.

“Only if you do,” he said.

I smiled.

“Don't you worry.”

I barely slept. I tried to, honestly, but I just couldn't keep my eyes closed. Brenner's face would pop up, then my mother's, and I just had to open my eyes and stare at the ceiling, telling myself I wasn't there, with them, having to be forced to be a happy family. Or worse, hearing them argue about what had happened today. Hearing my mother being led into a lie by Brenner, who would tell her that no, her daughter was insane and what I had accused him of wasn't clearly true.

I got up at seven am, after two hours of sleep, and went to take a long shower before anyone else woke up.

I was in the kitchen, forcing myself to eat an eggo (I had found a box of them in one of the shelves), when Joyce appeared, still in her pyjamas and with a messy hair. She blinked, surprised to see me already up. I forced a small smile.

“One moment,” she asked and left again.

I sat there, alone in the kitchen table, still pretending to be eating. She came back shortly after, with a clean face and her hair brushed. She took the chair next to mine and touched the hand that had been playing with a piece of ripped eggo.

“What has happened, dear?”

“You will think I’m insane,” I said.

She smiled softly.

“How about you let me be the judge of that?”

I let out a small noise, as if it were a laugh, and nodded.

I told Joyce everything. How I went to a party with Samantha and Will one night, when I was twenty, and woke up the next day in a flat I didn’t know, with a little girl calling me mommy and a husband that I had yet met. I told her about the confusion I had felt, what had happened to Mae when I accidentally fed her strawberry jam, and how Will was there to help me out. How Mike found out what was happening and, to my surprise, supported me instead of calling me crazy. I chuckled a bit when I explained to her that doing my job had been a huge challenge, but Max and Dustin, despite being unaware of what was happening, were amazing and helped me out. I also told her about my fight with Mike and how he accepted my decision of changing him and choosing my mother’s happiness over our family. Of course, there, I had to tell her what had happened years ago. Joyce cried and shook her head, revolted that I had to keep that secret for so many years instead of talking to someone about it; instead of telling my mother. I told her it was okay, that there were

days that, yes, were harder than others, but I felt safer now and, thanks to this messed up situation, to this joke of the universe happening, I found out that I could overcome my fear of love and men; that I found peace within me and didn't let what had happened that night ruined my entire life.

"And now?" Joyce asked me in the end.

I shrugged.

"Now, I know I'm ready to go back," I said.

"But have you made a decision?"

I hesitated at first, but then nodded.

"Yes, I have."

"Is it the right one?"

"To me, it is," I said.

Joyce smiled gently and leaned over to caress my cheek. I smiled back, feeling like a small kid being praised over something she had done well.

"Your Dad is so proud of you," she said.

"I've always hoped he would be," I replied.

She shook her head.

"He is. Wherever he is, I know that's how he feels about you, dear."

The rest of the vacation in Hawkins passed by quickly. Will and Lucas already settled down a date for the daughter's welcoming dinner. I promised to be there, of course, despite knowing that my time in this future was up. It was a weird feeling knowing that this life, somehow, would end for me and I would go back to being twenty, yet I didn't know when exactly it would happen. Every night, in Jonathan's bedroom, I would fall asleep, wondering if *this is it, I'm going back now*, and then I would wake up and still be here.

We went back to Washington, to our small flat, to our daily routine. Mike had more and more meetings with his agent and I started preparing a new festival with Max and Dustin. (And, no, it wasn't about painting, but film animation.) They were closer, I noticed on my first day back. Laughing with each other, talking in secret sometimes. Sometimes Dustin even left with Max at the end of the day. I just smiled, happy for them.

Mae's vocabulary started improving. Neither I nor Mike had to correct her as many times as before. We would smile at each other whenever she said something correct. We were doing a good job.

Mike never asked me about my decision. He never once tried to figure out if I had or not changed my mind. He just enjoyed our last moments together as if he were as well scared that he would wake up one day and I wouldn't be here. It was a silly thing to be scared of since, when I got back to my present time, this future would cease to exist and its possible existence would be decided by my choice on the night that I would meet Mike for the first time.

I actually got to meet my goddaughter, Laura. I took Mae, while Mike was at a meeting, to Will and Luca's flat. I introduce my daughter to her "cousin". They seemed to get along just fine, playing with toys on the floor. Will and Lucas were thrilled with their daughter, always bragging about the things they were already planning on doing and how she was amazing, and basically describing to me every little thing she had done since they had brought her home, which had been that morning.

I visited my Dad's memorial tree one afternoon after work. I talked to him a bit about how my life was going. I knew I smiled almost all the time that I talked to the tree, unlike the other times I had been here, crying and feeling confused and sad.

"So, Mike is doing great," I concluded. "He's very excited about the new book. It's still in the first drafts, but he just... I don't know, Dad, it makes me smile just to hear his enthusiasm about it. Our pillow talks are so silly, I know. Sorry." I chuckled and looked down at my wedding band, which I had been playing with since I started talking about Mike. "I... I've made my decision, Dad. I've made it a few weeks now and I'm still here. That part confuses me sometimes. Like,

what else is there to be done? I know what I want..." I looked up at the sky. "Did you hear me, Universe? I know what I want, so..." I smiled softly. "If anyone's listening, I'm okay. I know now."

That night, after putting Mae to bed and surprising Mike in the shower, I laid down next to him and simply stared at him. He stared back at first, smiling, but then finally said, "Now, you're just being weird."

I laughed and closed the distance between us, dropping one of my legs on top of his while he wrapped his arm around my torso and pulled me even closer. We kissed softly and, in the end, I said, "Go to sleep."

So, he did. And I closed my eyes as well, trying to find some sleep. But it just didn't show up, like a rude guest who I had told to be here at eight and it was already ten and there was no sign of him.

I looked at the clock. It was two in the morning and there was no trace of sleep inside of me. I frowned, confused, and for a second I considered getting up and going to drink a glass of water. But I was too comfortable in Mike's arms to move, so I just looked at him, traced his small freckles carefully and played with his dark hair.

It was three in the morning and I wasn't sleeping. Then, four am came and I sighed.

I gazed at Mike, with nothing better to do. He had changed positions a few times and was now laying on his back with an arm over his eyes and the other one touching my belly. I smiled and, out of the blue, decided to wake him up.

"Mike, Mike," I said, stroking his cheekbone. He moved a bit, groaning and turned to his side, facing me. "Mike, come on."

He half-opened his eyes, sleepy, and let out a sound to tell me he was awake. I kissed his nose.

"I want to tell you something," I said.

He let out another sound.

“I choose you,” I confessed.

He blinked, confused, and, in his sleepy state, smiled softly and pulled me closer.

“I choose you too,” he mumbled.

---

There was loud noise. An annoying loud noise. But not as annoying as before. The music playing was too far away. Was it supposed to be too far?

I groaned and moved my body, trying to find a more comfortable position. I was laying somewhere hard, yet soft. Softer than stairs.

I opened my eyes.

There was a random guy staring at me. He was too close to me for a stranger. I shouted, surprised and in panic, and my reflexes came into action. I punched him in the face.

I stood up quickly, realizing I had been laying on a sofa, and was in a house division that I did not know about, but there was music and shouting outside the walls. The guy was now sitting on the floor touching his face with a pained expression.

I noticed the door and moved towards it fast. But my head was dizzy and my throat had something in it that shouldn't be there. Vomit. Before I could reach the door, I leaned down and threw up on the floor.

I cleaned my mouth and stared at the vomit on the floor. It was disgusting and I still could see bits of the pizza I had before coming here. Why did I let Samantha put pineapple on it?

“Jesus,” I heard the guy say.

I panicked, hearing his rough voice, and I went to open the door. Suddenly there was a voice in my head saying *I bought you a hot dog and French fries*. I blinked confused and looked back. The guy, who had black hair and was a bit too pale for his own good, was touching his nose with his fingers and then checking if he was bleeding.

Did I know him?

I half-closed my eyes, drunk and disoriented. He didn't even notice my stare, still making sure he wasn't bleeding.

"French fries," I said. He finally looked at me and frowned. He was cute. "I want French fries."

"Ah..., okay," he said, confused.

"Let's go eat French fries."

He snorted, sceptical, and, when I did not stop staring at him, he realized I was actually being honest. "Oh, okay." He stood up. "Let's go eat French fries, then."

"And hot dogs," I added as he walked closer to me.

"Hot dogs, right," he repeated and his eyes darted down to the floor. I followed it and saw the vomit. My vomit. He chuckled. "Nice," he commented.

"Thanks. I did it myself." I smiled proudly and he laughed.

The guy opened the door for me. I walked out and saw a couple making out against a wall and a group of people shouting and laughing with each other. I looked at my right and saw the stairs. I frowned. Didn't I fall asleep on them?

"I took you to the room," the guy said as he noticed my stare. "The stairs just seemed... the wrong place to sleep."

"I agree," I said.

"Well, thank God you didn't fall asleep on them, then," he replied in a tone that I did not understand at first, but then, while we climbed

down the stairs, I realized it had been sarcasm.

“Hey, don’t sarcasm me,” I replied as he opened the front door of the flat.

“Sorry.”

We walked quietly to the lifts and he called for it. While we waited, I glanced over him once, and then again. I frowned.

“Wait, was that sarcasm again?”

He just smiled.

My walk was weird, I noticed, as we walked out of the building and into the cold night. I trembled and rubbed my own arms with my hands. The guy, as a gentleman, took off his black jacket and gave it to me.

“Wow, how nice” I said as I accepted his jacket.

He chuckled.

“My name is Mike, by the way,” he said and stopped me from crossing the street as a car passed by.

“Eleven,” I answered.

He stopped me again, but this time there was not car. He just stared at me wide-eyed. I looked at him, confused. As I stayed quiet, I noticed how dizzy my vision was and how many freckles the guy had on his face. They were adorable, really.

“Your freckles are cute,” I confessed out of the blue.

He just kept staring at me. I crossed my arms, feeling a bit awkward, and gave him a *what the hell?* look. He finally snapped out of this trance.

“You punched me in the face,” he said.

I frowned, not believing his words at first, and then remembered the



scene in the room when I woke up. I made an apologetic face.

“Sorry. In my defence, I had just woken-“

“No, not now. Well, yes, now too, but... when we were kids,” he said and I stared at him like he was crazy. “There was a school trip to a zoo and you punched me, thinking I had messed with your ponytails. But I didn’t, so... you stayed with me as... you know, the workers took care of my bleeding nose. You punched me like... ten years ago,” he concluded, astonished.

I kept staring at him, unsure of that story. I tried to remember any school trip I took when I was a kid to a zoo, but honestly my mind just scattered around other weird thoughts. Like French fries.

“I’m hungry,” I reminded him.

“Right, French fries and hot dogs.” He smiled at me and then helped me cross the street.

There was an old man with a hot dog cart, standing at the entrance of this park that I knew very well. We stopped there and asked for two hot dogs, two small bags of French fries and a bottle of water. When it was time to pay, the guy, Mike, looked at me.

“I don’t have any money,” I confessed before taking a big bite of my hot dog.

He chuckled. “No problem.” And he paid for everything.

I guided us into the park. I wanted to find a bench and sit down for a while as I ate. I couldn’t walk, eat and talk to a stranger at the same time as I was drunk. There was a limit.

“So, your name is Mike... Mike what?” I asked after we sat down.

“Wheeler.”

“Mike Wheeler,” I repeated. “And I’ve punched you twice.”

He nodded, eating a French fry.

"I somehow don't believe in that."

"It was... ah, in fifth grade? We went to a zoo," he reminded me.

"What zoo?"

"Pfft. No idea. I didn't even want to go to that stupid school trip," he confessed and ate a piece of his hot dog.

"Why not?"

"There was this super important Dungeons and Dragons' game that I had wanted to play with my friends and I had to delay it because of it," he explained.

I nodded, trying to be serious. "That must have been horrible."

"It was."

I snorted a chuckle.

"Hey, it was! Ten-year-old me loved that shit."

I gave him a stern look and he tried to avoid it by eating more fries.

"You still love it."

"Yup."

I laughed.

"Anyways, you punched me right in the nose and it was terrible. I thought I had broken it," he told me.

I laughed again and then started coughing because a bit of chewed hot dog got stuck in my throat. Mike patted my back and gave me water.

After drinking, I said, "Thanks. And, yeah, my dad was a cop... He taught me how to punch right."

"You told me that," Mike said. "That your dad was a cop."

I frowned. "I told you a lot about myself." He hummed in agreement. "And you remember it all?"

He chuckled. "Well, yeah, you told me your name was Eleven. Almost everything you told me stuck with me because... Eleven!" He opened his arms, like that would demonstrate the magnitude of my nickname. "Like, who calls themselves a number?"

"Well, yeah, I've always been that creative," I replied proudly, making him laugh again.

We ate our hot dogs and French fries while we talked about random things. At a certain point, I asked him why he had gone to the party. He said he had a date, but was too late for it because of this paper he had to deliver until midnight.

"She might be looking for you."

He shrugged, like he didn't care. "It isn't like we're in love or something. It would probably be a one-time thing. You know?"

I nodded. "Yup, I know a lot about those."

He snorted. "Oh, what a grand master you must be by now, then."

I slapped his forearm playfully.

After we ate, I stood up and told him I had to go home.

"I can take you," he offered standing up as well.

I shook my head, walking to a garbage bin to throw out the papers that had surrounded the hot dog and the French fries.

"No, you might want to come up with me."

"Wouldn't dream of that," he replied straightaway. I gave him a look. "Honestly. I just want to make sure you get home in one piece. I mean, you're still a bit drunk."

I rolled my eyes.

“Fine. This way, Mike Wheeler,” I said and started walking deeper into the park. I knew it would lead us to another big entrance/exit and that one would be closer to my place.

I hoped Will and Samantha were okay. I frowned and took out my phone. I had no messages from both of them. Of course. They were probably having fun with their guys.

I finally reached my building and showed the keys to Mike.

“Well, good night, Mike Wheeler,” I said.

“Good night, Eleven,” he replied with a soft smile and watched me enter the building. Through the glass door, I saw him waving at me. I waved back and smiled, weirdly happy about that gesture of him.

Finally, I called for the lift and, as I waited, my mind wandered to what had happened this night.

Mike Wheeler seemed like a good guy, didn't he?

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

One chapter left! I hope you've enjoyed this chapter.  
Please tell me what you think.

## 17. How it all went down

I had the worst hangover of my life.

I groaned and opened my eyes. I took a quick glance at the alarm clock. It was midday. There was music playing and people talking somewhere. I couldn't believe Samantha and Will were already up. Those two were the most annoying people in hangover days.

I stood up and walked out of the bedroom and into the direction of the kitchen. Will was sitting at the table, drinking orange juice while Samantha was by the oven, waiting for something to cook. It smelled like pizza. I groaned. What an awful smell.

"Oh, look who has shown up!" Samantha said in a not very nice tone of voice. "Bitch, you left me alone."

I half-closed my eyes. "You didn't text me once last night."

"Well, I was mad because you left me all alone at that party," she complained.

Will snorted a laugh. "Don't listen to her. She's pissed off because her date didn't show up last night. At all."

"Ugh," Samantha let out as she leaned down to check on her pizza. "He is such an idiot."

"Where did you meet him?" Will asked her.

"I told you. At Zack's."

There was a quiet moment.

"Who is Zack?" Will asked.

"Ugh, Will, honestly, shut up."

He laughed.

I scratched my head, sleepy. I suddenly needed water. So much

water. So, I walked over to the sink and poured myself a glass of it. I drank it all.

“Damn it, you’re thirsty,” Samantha said and moved to the table, where her phone was. She picked it up. “Do you guys think I should text him? Like, ‘Hey, Mike, you’re a piece of shit. Thanks for last night and-“

“Wait, Mike?” I said.

She nodded. “Yup, he’s an asshole.”

“You’re only saying that because he didn’t show up,” Will observed.

“Well, doesn’t that make him an asshole?”

I rubbed the sides of my forehead and closed my eyes. Mike. I remembered that name. What was his surname?

“What’s his last name?” I asked Samantha. She gave me an odd look. “Like, it’s like...” I started making circles with my finger.

“What is that?” Will asked, confused.

“The thing that makes the car move,” I said, not getting the word.

“The engine?” He suggested.

“Wheel,” Samantha answered, suspicious. “His last name is Wheeler.”

“That!” I shouted happily. “Mike Wheeler, yeah. He helped me out last night. I fell asleep on the stairs and he took care of me.”

“Oh really?” She said surprised. “Well, in that case, he’s a good guy. I forgive him for not showing up.”

“He did show up,” I replied. “I just... was in the way and... yeah, he’s good a guy,” I agreed shyly.

“But I’m not going to text him,” Samantha stated. “If he wants to, he texts me.”

“You do well,” I muttered and left the kitchen to go take a shower.

A shower always helped me get through a hangover. It was like cleansing my soul and spirit, washing away the alcohol and the dizziness that I had felt the previous night. It also helped me regain some memories since it gave me the time alone to think properly.

As I washed my hair, I started remember Mike Wheeler better. He was a good guy, really. He took me away from the stairs, where I had been helpless and vulnerable, and laid me down on a bed. He didn't touch me, he didn't do anything wrong. I know he didn't because... I closed my eyes. I had been there. I had woken up from a drunk night and remembered the filthy hands of someone who had touched me without my permission. I remembered that feeling clearly. It still haunted my dreams. So, no, Mike Wheeler had not hurt me the previous night while I had been unconscious. He took care of me, a complete stranger, instead of going to find his date. And wasn't it ironic that his date was my best friend?

*Maybe I could send him a thank you message,* the thought took over my mind before I could control it.

I snorted and water spilled out of my nose. Why would I do that? Why would I engage in friendly conversation with a guy that I met on a drunk night? I mean, yes, I've done that, but usually we kind of just ran into each other during our day-to-day lives, I wouldn't intentionally text them... What would be the point of it?

I got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my body. I cleaned the foggy steam from the mirror and took a good look at myself. My skin had more colour now, but there were still dark circles under my eyes from sleeping too little. I really hated how early Samantha and Will woke up on post-party days. Honestly, why couldn't they just sleep their hangover away instead of being so active?

My mind went back to Mike Wheeler. I shook my head, trying to get rid of the memory of his smile, and went to my bedroom to clean up and change to some comfortable clothes.

I was in the middle of putting a hoodie on when some strange, spontaneous courage came to me and I ran to the kitchen.

“Can I call Mike?” I asked Samantha.

She was in the middle of biting a slice of her pizza and stopped still, hearing my question. Will chuckled. He was now reading a book. How could he read on a day like this? Hangovers didn’t affect him at all, honestly.

“Why?”

“To thank him for last night. He bought me food.”

Will laughed. I threw him a deadly stare.

“What? You always go for the food, honestly.”

Samantha put down her slice of pizza and looked at me cautious. We stared at each other for a few seconds, me feeling awkward while she analysed me.

“Are you going to bone the date that stood me up?”

I rolled my eyes.

“No, of course not,” I replied while Will laughed.

“Oh please, do,” he said.

To my surprise, Samantha nodded in agreement and picked her phone up from the table. She touched it for a while and then passed it over to me. I took it and noticed it was ringing. I panicked.

“Honestly, Samantha!” I exclaimed, leaving the kitchen and going into the living-room. It was a mess since we had a few drinks here before going to the party. There were cans of beer and two bottles of cheap wine laying around. The cushions were thrown all over the floor and the TV was in a strange sloping position, instead of being fittingly face to face with the couch.

“Hey Samantha. I’m so so-“

“It’s me,” I interrupted him. “Ahh... Eleven,” I added shyly.



Mike went quiet for a moment.

“How did you... Wait, what?”

“Samantha is my friend. We live together, actually,” I explained to him.

I bit my bottom lip when I heard him groan in frustration.

“That’s so embarrassing,” he complained. “Is she mad?”

“Ah, not really. Not after finding out that you took care of her drunk friend,” I replied as I pushed the TV to its place. I took a good look at it, checking if it was right.

“Well, it was no problem, really. You were quite friendly, so...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“So...” I repeated.

What did I have to say now? Oh, yes, a thank-you.

“Thank you for last night, by the way. If it weren’t for you, I...”

He sensed my weak tone of voice and spoke, “It’s okay, Eleven, really.”

“El,” I corrected him. “Everyone calls me El.”

“Oh, El? That’s nice.”

I didn’t say anything. But I wanted to. Why did I want to? What was I supposed to say?

*I get a call from Samantha and it’s actually you, asking me to go study to a small café you knew.*

I frowned. There it was, the voice again, that, for some reason, resembled Mike Wheeler’s voice. Why did his voice tell me those things?

“Well, anyways, if that was it, then-“

“Do you want to go study with me today?” I asked him, just like the voice had said I did. I closed my eyes. Why did I do this?

“Oh, really? Ah... Sure. Where?”

“This café I know... It’s near the park we went to last night? It’s called *Winky Latte*.”

Mike laughed. “Okay, that sounds good. When can you be there?”

“Ah...” I panicked, looking down at myself. I had just taken a shower, but I wasn’t in my best clothes and still had my hair wet. “When can *you* be there?”

He laughed again.

“Around... three?”

“Sounds great,” I answered as I tried to find a clock in the living-room to make sure I had time to prepare myself.

Why did I need to prepare myself?

*Get a grip, Eleven.*

I turned on the TV just to check the time. It was one pm. Okay. Two hours. I had plenty of time.

“Yup, three o’clock sounds really great,” I reassured him.

“Well, good. Then, see you later, El,” Mike said and I could almost sense the smile on his face.

I smiled. “See you later, Mike Wheeler.”

I hung up and walked back to the kitchen. Right before I entered, I heard rush movements from the inside and someone hitting against something and saying “ow”. I rolled my eyes and walked in.

“You guys were spying on me,” I accused them.

They were both sitting on their seats, showing off their best innocent faces, but Samantha had one of her feet up on the chair with her and

was rubbing it. A clear sign that she had bumped somewhere.

“Honestly, you two,” I murmured and gave Samantha back her phone.

I went to the fridge to find something to eat and that was when Will said, “Well, are you two going to bone?”

I almost dropped an opened can of sausages. I looked back at them and frowned.

“No, why would I?” I asked and put the can down on the counter.

“He’s cute,” Samantha said.

I looked back into the fridge, while saying, “Yeah, right, because you’re the most impartial person in this room to say so since, you know, you did ask him to go to a party with you.”

“I bet he is cute,” Will said as I took out a box of eggs. I felt like eating scrambled eggs and sausages.

“You haven’t even seen him,” I retorted. I moved closer to the shelves and tiptoed to get a fry-pan from one of them. I grabbed the vegetable oil bottle as well and poured a bit into the pan. I then went to grab a small bowl.

“I trust Samantha’s... Actually, I take that back. She slept with Troy last night, so I cannot trust her judgement. What? I can’t”, Will said, certainly in response to some face that Samantha had made.

I snorted a real loud laugh as my best friend complained that she didn’t want to discuss that matter and we could never, ever, bring it up again.

“How could you sleep with Troy? I mean...” I cracked an egg into the bowl and then grabbed another one.

“Like you’re the one to talk,” she said. “You’ve made out with him. Twice.”

“Yes, and that’s how I know he isn’t the best guy to fool around. He’s

going to annoy the crap out of you, Sammy,” I responded as I mixed the three eggs carefully.

She groaned and her forehead hit the table with a loud noise. Will even jumped, scared.

“Jesus,” he muttered.

I started making my scrambled eggs. My empty stomach was now starting to complain about the lack of food in it. Unless the smell of Samantha’s pizza invaded my nostrils. Then, I would just feel sick. My stomach was clearly reacting against my last night’s dinner.

I cut the sausages into little pieces and mixed them together with the scrambled eggs. Meanwhile, Samantha and Will had picked up another conversation theme: Lucas.

“He is nice,” Will said. “I mean, for now.”

Samantha snorted.

“Remember how you used to fall in love with every guy you met? Now you’re so sceptical,” she claimed with her mouth full of pizza.

Will remained quiet.

I finished my eggs and transferred them to a plate. I found a clean fork and sat down next to Will, who kept reading this book about... I leaned my head down to read the title: *The Misplays of the Universe*.

“What the hell is that about?” I asked him.

Will checked the book’s cover before answering, “it’s about parallel universes and time travel.”

“Why are you reading that?” I asked, amazed.

He shrugged. “Found it in the library a few days ago.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Shouldn’t you be drawing or some shit?” Samantha asked. “I

remember very well how much you complained before the party about this stupid project you had to do.”

Will sent her a death glare.

“Your priorities are a bit messed up, aren’t they?” He asked. “You remember that, but having sex with Troy is just a blur in your memory.”

I snorted so hard that I almost spat out chewed eggs back to the plate.

“You’re not funny, Will Byers, you’re not,” Samantha replied dryly and stood up, taking her dirty plate with her to the sink. She turned on the water and started cleaning it.

“Wait, you don’t remember it?” I asked.

“I know it happened,” she argued.

I laughed again. And that was the end of the conversation since Samantha evidently didn’t want to share *nor remember* any details from the previous night.

I ate the rest of my scrambled eggs in peace while Will read and Samantha disappeared to her room.

It was around two pm when I decided to finally get dressed. I was nervous. Too weirdly nervous. I was just going to study (why did I say study? I couldn’t even concentrate in my own thoughts, let alone read about films and cultures) with this guy I had met drunk. It was a thank-you hang out, actually. He had paid for my drunk-and-hungry ass and I would return the favour today. In an hour.

“Why are you getting dressed?” Samantha asked, stopping by my half-open door and seeing me undecided between a pink, summer dress and a white skirt with a blue blouse.

“Going out, of course,” I replied.

“But... it’s Hangover Day. You never leave the house on a Hangover Day,” she stated.

I ignored her and decided to go with the skirt and the blouse. I took off my pants and checked if my legs were properly presentable for a skirt. Seeing they were a bit dry, I went to find a bottle of hydrating cream that I had somewhere in my bedroom. Samantha was leaning against the door, watching me with a confused expression.

I massaged my legs with the cream, very aware that she wasn't going to leave until I told her where and with whom I was going out. I sighed and tried to ignore her a bit more.

After a bit, Will joined her and they both stared at me, while I buttoned up my blue blouse.

"Where are you going?" He asked.

"Out," Samantha answered for me.

"What? It's Hangover Day."

"I know!"

I rolled my eyes and went to find a good pair of sneakers. The ones I had used to the party were by the open window, catching some air since they smelled awfully bad. I picked out these old sneakers I had that were black and had dark-blue shoelaces. Will and Samantha kept staring at me and followed me to the bathroom, where I grabbed the hairdryer and connected it to power plug.

They were kind of annoying me. To make it even worse, I could almost feel the minutes go by. Three o'clock was almost here and Mike Wheeler's face haunted my mind, making me even more nervous. I knew he had a face full of freckles and sweet, brown eyes. While I stared at myself in the mirror, blow-drying my hair, I just kept picturing his face and hearing his laugh. I knew he had a husky kind of voice that made me want to keep listening to him. I knew he was nice. Too nice.

"Honestly, El," Samantha complained right after I turned off the hairdryer. "Tell us where you're going."

"To meet Mike," I muttered and pushed them away from the bathroom's entrance as I left and went back to my bedroom. In there,

I was going to check my hair again and brush it a bit.

Of course, they followed me.

“You two are so going to hook up,” Samantha said with a smile. “You can thank me later, of course.”

I was about to reply when Samantha’s voice talked again, but not out loud, not here in my bedroom, where Will was presented. It talked in my mind, and it echoed, *I said the only reason you two were together, having a baby, was because I had asked Mike out. So, you know.... I called you a thief.* I frowned, confused.

“I want flowers, okay? For getting you two to meet and bone,” she added, interrupting my thoughts. “Oh, and dinner. Please.”

I shook my head and brushed my messy hair. It was a bit curly, just like my dad’s could have been if he allowed it to grow. I had seen pictures of him when he was younger – around twelve or thirteen - and had this rebellious phase. It was so funny to see him with such messy curls and a bored face, obviously annoyed to be in the pictures.

I missed him so much.

“When are you leaving?” Will asked.

I checked my phone, which I had left on the beside-table, and said, “In about ten minutes.” I wanted to be there on time, to make sure he didn’t get lost since I was the one that knew the café and the area around it.

“She’ll only be back tomorrow,” Samantha said and they both snickered.

I rolled my eyes. “You guys are disgusting. Can’t I just go meet a friend?”

“No,” they both said at the same time.

After I gave them a death stare, they snorted and finally gave me some space. I picked up a jacket to go with my outfit and grabbed a

random bag. I put in it everything I could need: my photocopies from the Film Studies subject, my pencil case, the notebook that I usually took to classes, plus my phone, wallet and keys.

I took one last look at myself in the mirror and left the room, closing the door behind me. I caught Samantha and Will in the living-room, which was now cleaner (probably because of Will), and they were half-laying, half-sitting on the sofa, changing TV channels so fast that I was sure they weren't even checking what was happening on each one of them.

"I'm going out. See you guys later," I said.

"Please, come home sexually pleased," Samantha advised as Will replied, "Bye, have fun."

I closed the flat's door with a loud bang and heard Samantha's laugh echoing through it as I approached the lift and called for it.

The walk to the *Winky Latte* (the name was the most ridiculous thing ever, yes, but we just loved it because it had such a cool environment and the owner, Jeff, was a really cool guy) took me a while, around fifteen minutes since I had to stop by a small bookshop and buy a postcard. I was going to send it to Joyce. It wasn't her birthday or anything, I just randomly liked to send her postcards. It was my little way of reminding her that I did not forget about her. Will talked to her almost every day on the phone, but I was never one to do it. So, postcards were the solution. And today I had picked one that had the image of two small puppies sleeping.

I stopped before the crosswalk, waiting for the traffic lights to turn green to the walkers. I could see the café at a small distance and, as I looked around, I froze, seeing Mike Wheeler, leaning against a bike and waiting patiently. I took my phone out of my jacket and checked the time. 14:50. He was earlier. That fact made me feel even more nervous than I already was. Was he eager to see me? Or was he just one of those people who liked to arrive early? I didn't have an answer, of course, so my heart just beat fast.

"Miss, it's green," a nice man told me as he crossed the street.



And I saw the small, green man in the traffic lights, telling me that it was okay to go. But I couldn't move. Why couldn't I move?

*"Are you going to kiss me now, Wheeler?" I asked drunk, pushed up against the wall of my living-room. There was a song on and I could hear Lucas and Will laughing together and dancing. But my eyes were on Mike's brown eyes. He was as drunk as I was.*

*"Only if you want me to," he replied and tried to smirk, but it just came out as a nervous smile, which made me giggle.*

*We were friends. We never kissed. But I had wondered for a while now how his lips tasted like.*

*I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer. Our noses touched and I felt Mike's breath against my skin. I smiled.*

*"What are you waiting for?"*

*He closed the distance between our mouths.*

I blinked, confused, as the cars start going again. The light was red for me now. Mike was still patiently waiting by the café's door.

*I was having a panic attack. I couldn't breathe, tears fell down my face and I had this knot in my throat, keeping me from sobbing, from saying anything. I was shaking. My fingers didn't stop still and I grabbed my own hair, trying to find a way to stop myself from panicking.*

*Two hands touched my arms. Softly. Carefully.*

*"It's okay, El," Mike murmured. "Just breathe, come on. Breathe with me."*

*And I did. I looked at him and followed his example. In and out. In and out. I started to feel calmer after a while and Mike smiled softly.*

*"It's okay," he repeated.*

*I shook my head. "No, it's not. She's getting married to him." I cried again.*

*Mike pulled me to the floor with him and to his lap, holding me in his arms. I cried against his shoulder, my sobs muffled against his t-shirt. She was marrying Brenner. My mother was marrying that monster.*

*"El, I... I don't know what to say... I want to, but I..." Mike went quiet.*

*He didn't know the story. He didn't know what Brenner had done to me.*

*I pulled a bit back and he tried to clean the tears in my eyes. I shook my head and did it myself. I controlled my sobs, always looking down ashamed. I didn't want Mike to know.*

*"El," he called, concerned.*

*"You'll see me differently if I tell you," I finally spoke.*

*Mike's hand touched my chin and gently pulled my head up. I looked him in the eyes.*

*"Trust me, El, no matter what you tell me, I'll never see you any less, or different, than I see you now."*

*The traffic light was green for me again. I took a deep breath and nervously crossed it. Mike Wheeler was closer now. Just a street ahead. I didn't remember even feeling this nervous. Or was it excitement that I was feeling?*

*"I need to relax." It was the first thing I said when Mike picked up the phone.*

*On the other side, I heard his laugh.*

*"Again?" He sounded cocky.*

*"Well, yeah, but since, you know, Matt wasn't available, I had to call you again," I teased.*

*Mike laughed again.*

*"Right, because you would totally booty call Matt," he replied smugly.*

*I sighed. "Can't you just come over, please?"*

*He went quiet for a few seconds and I knew he was only doing it to get me frustrated. "Mike!"*

*"Yes, I'm going. Ten minutes, geez," he said with another laugh. He was always laughing. Mike Wheeler was a happy person. I knew that since the first night I met him. He was happy like I wasn't, so we got along great.*

*Twenty minutes later, we were on my bed. I was on top of him, in the middle of a battle between taking off his shirt or keep kissing him like my life depended on it.*

*Mike pulled back to help me with the shirt and chuckled.*

*"You keep coming at me like that and I will think you're in love with me or something."*

*"Shut up," I said and kissed him again.*

*Because sometimes I did wonder if I was too addicted to him.*

*I stopped still as I saw Mike move away from the bike and taking a look inside the café through the window display. I touched my chest and felt my heart beat fast. I gulped.*

*We were at the park, drunk and wandering around, after escaping a boring party that Samantha had took us to. It was the same park as always, the one where we ate hot dogs together, the one where I had done a tree memorial to my dad, the one where Samantha and I swam in the lake and almost got arrested for it...*

*There was a group of people dancing around, with music on, but we were a bit far away from them. We could only hear the music. So, I pulled Mike to a dance and he, being the most awful dancer ever, tried to keep up with the rhythm, but honestly sucked at it and I laughed.*

*"You're so mean, El," he complained and stopped still, crossing his arms.*

*A quieter song came on. In the spur of the moment, I wrapped my arms around his neck and started slow-dance with him. He looked at me, surprised, and I smiled.*

*We danced for a bit, listening to the melody of the song, to the lyrics of it,*

*and gazing into each other eyes. Mike had the kindest eyes I had ever seen.*

*"I love you." The words were out before I could stop them.*

*As I realized what I had said, I stepped back and tripped over a stone, taking an astounded Mike with me. We landed on the grass and I laughed.*

*Mike rubbed his elbow, grumpy because it hurt, and I looked at him. He was pouting and I snickered and pulled him closer to a kiss.*

*He didn't say those three words back that night and I didn't ask for it, too drunk to deal with that kind of talk. No, I waited until the next day, after I woke up in his bed, only wearing one of his t-shirts. I waited until after I had gone to the bathroom to wash my face and teeth (I already had a toothbrush in his place). When I got back to the bedroom, I jumped on the bed. Mike groaned and opened his eyes. He looked at me with a sleepy smile.*

*"You didn't say it back," I protested and pulled a pillow to my lap.*

*He frowned.*

*"What?"*

*"You know what," I said.*

*He rubbed his eyes, taking the sleep away from them, and then sat up. He grabbed my hands and made me look at him.*

*"Did you mean it?"*

*I thought for a second and then said, "of course."*

*He smiled. "Then, I love you too, El Hopper."*

*Mike finally saw me approaching. A small smile flourished on his face.*

*"Sorry I'm late," I said.*

*He shook his head. "You're good. I got here early..."*

We stared at each other awkwardly, without knowing what to do, or say. Mike's eyes wandered to other places, embarrassed, and I noticed the bike he had been leaning against.

"Is it yours?"

"Yup. It has been with me since I was twelve." He smiled proudly.

"Will also rides his bike everywhere," I told him.

"It's easier," Mike said.

I agreed.

*"You got me pregnant!" I exclaimed in an angry voice.*

*Mike didn't say anything at first. He looked at me with an amused expression.*

*"You're an asshole," I said.*

*"You're smiling," he replied.*

*And I tried to control my facial expression.*

*"I am not."*

*He chuckled.*

*"Yes, you are," he replied, leaned over to give me a kiss, and then took the pregnancy test from my hand. We're sitting in his bathroom's floor for a few minutes now, waiting for the stupid test to tell me if I was pregnant or not. And I was. I had a life inside of me. I touched my belly. "Well... What do you want to do?" He asked tensely.*

*I blinked. I was only twenty-one. What did I want to do? We had been officially dating for what? Four months? It was too soon. We were too young.*

*But it was Mike.*

*He was the kindest. He loved me despite knowing every detail and secret about me. He had been there for me since the night we met. He was the*

*guy that bought me hot dogs and French fries. He was the guy that helped me get through one of the most awful days of my life. He was the guy that punched Brenner in the face for me. He loved me.*

*"I don't know," I said. "But I'm not scared." Because he wouldn't leave me. Not now, not ever.*

*Mike smiled. "Me neither."*

*I introduced Mike to the best latte there was in town and, in return, he promised to take me to this place where they made really good waffles.*

*"I love waffles," I told him with a smile.*

*"Really? I used to be obsessed with them when I was younger... Well, not waffles... Eggos."*

*"Yes!" I exclaimed happily and he laughed. "My dad used to buy tons of eggo boxes for me... I could finish one alone in one afternoon."*

*Mike laughed again.*

*"You're insane," he said jokily.*

*"Let's get married," I asked.*

*Mike, who was a bit sleepy and very comfortable on the small bed we had made with blankets on the living-room's floor, blinked, confused.*

*"What?"*

*"Let's get married, Mike. Tonight."*

*I touched my small belly. I was five months pregnant. It was raining. We had just watched one of the Friday 13<sup>th</sup>'s films and ate a bunch of sweets. I couldn't be more awake and sure of what I wanted.*

*"You're insane," Mike replied. "It's three in the morning. Where can we do it?"*

*I pouted.*

*He sat up straight, facing me better. "Don't pout at me."*

*"But, babe, I just asked to marry me and you said no."*

*He sounded offended.*

*"I did not say no!"*

*I tried to control a smile. He muttered something under his breath and grabbed his hair, thinking. Suddenly, he looked at me.*

*"I have a friend who might help us..."*

*My smile grew bigger.*

*"So, are you sure you want to study?"*

*I stared at Mike, trying to find strength in me to say yes, of course, duh, that's why we are here, but I just groaned and shook my head. He chuckled.*

*"I have the worst hangovers ever. I cannot think straight, let alone study."*

*"Then,..." He gave me a confused, yet hopeful smile. "Why did you invite me to study?"*

*"It just came out, honestly. I wanted to meet you and pay you back last night's meal."*

*He laughed.*

*"Oh, you didn't have to."*

*"Promise me something," I murmured. Mae was sleeping two rooms away. She was three already. It felt like yesterday that I had found out I was pregnant with her and now she was a big girl who slept in her own bedroom.*

*"What?" Mike asked and his arm, which was wrapped around my waist, pulled me closer. He kissed my nose.*

*"Promise me that, whatever happens, you'll always love me."*

*Mike blinked, confused.*

*"Why are you asking me to promise that?"*

*I shrugged. "Just because."*

*He shook his head and kissed me softly.*

*"I promise you, El Hopper, that no matter what... it will always be you."*

*"And you will love me no matter what?"*

*"And I'll love you no matter what."*

*"And trust?"*

*"Always."*

"But honestly," Mike started. Our cups and plates were empty and it was almost six pm. I couldn't believe I had just spent three hours talking to this guy and didn't get bored once. "Why did you invite me to come here today?"

I stopped still, thinking about that question and what kind of answer I could give him.

In the end, I just smiled and shrugged.

"I have a good feeling about you, Mike Wheeler."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So, this is it, guys. Thank you so much for reading and following this story. All your comments and kudos mean the world to me. I hope you aren't disappointed. I promise I'll be around with other ST fics.